



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### **Usage guidelines**

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### **About Google Book Search**

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>







6 Kenton  
74 Leicester Rd  
H2 Broughton

J. A. Lattin  
+ 64. G. Sheehan  
H2 Broughton  
Manchester

status 22 for 7 a

not to be passed



2

3  
12

1

4



HER BESETTING VIRTUE







HER BESETTING  
VIRTUE

BY STUART

BOUGHT

XIII



HER BESETTING  
VIRTUE

By  
MARY STUART BOYD

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY A. S. BOYD

HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
LONDON MCMVIII



*Butler and Tanner, The School Printing Works, Froms,*

# Contents

## CHAPTER I

GOOD ADVICE WASTED . . . . .

## CHAPTER II

ONE RAT LEAVES . . . . .

## CHAPTER III

AT A HOTEL-PENSION . . . . .

## CHAPTER IV

IN REFINED SURROUNDINGS . . . . .

## CHAPTER V

A NOVICE IN NARROW WAYS . . . . .

## CHAPTER VI

A SELF-APPOINTED CENSOR . . . . .

## CHAPTER VII

THE MAN FROM THE MIDLANDS . . . . .



## CHAPTER VIII

DISCORDANT NOTES . . . . .

## CHAPTER IX

THE FORBIDDEN TOPIC . . . . .

## CHAPTER X

RENUNCIATION . . . . .

## CHAPTER XI

GREY DAYS . . . . .

## CHAPTER XII

FRANCES BURNS HER BOATS . . . . .

## CHAPTER XIII

AN EGG TO TEA . . . . .

## CHAPTER XIV

BYEWAYS AT BUDCOMBE . . . . .

## CHAPTER XV

A HUSBAND IN A HAZE . . . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

THE SOUL OF MISS BISTER . . . . .

## CONTENTS

PAGE

### CHAPTER XVII

CYNTHIA AIRS A GRIEVANCE . . . . .

62

### CHAPTER XVIII

MR. LETT'S WALKING STICK . . . . .

72

### CHAPTER XIX

MISS MITHEN'S GENTLEMAN . . . . .

83

### CHAPTER XX

ADMIRAL WYON'S TABOO . . . . .

91

### CHAPTER XXI

FRANCES IS APPREHENSIVE . . . . .

104

### CHAPTER XXII

SHORT COMMONS . . . . .

112

### CHAPTER XXIII

A SOMBRE SUITOR . . . . .

121

### CHAPTER XXIV

MR. ROCK PROVES STAUNCH . . . . .

131

### CHAPTER XXV

TANTALIZATION . . . . .

141



## CHAPTER XXVI

SCOTCH MIST . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXVII

SIR STEPHEN RUSSELL, K.C.B. . . . .

## CHAPTER XXVIII

UNDER ONE ROOF . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXIX

WOES—REAL AND IMAGINARY . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXX

HER BESETTING VICE . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXXI

CYNTHIA SPRINGS A MINE . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXXII

FRANCES RUNS AWAY . . . . .

## CHAPTER XXXIII

CAPTURED . . . . .

. 234

## CHAPTER I

. 239

## GOOD ADVICE WASTED

. 250

“IF you insist on pursuing such a course I must understand that you do so in opposition to my advice, and with my abhorrent disapproval. For I cannot but regard the course as suicidal.”

. 261

Having delivered his ultimatum, Tom Chau—sole acting partner of the firm of Chau Vole & Chauncery, old-established solicitors in Lincoln’s Inn—leaned back in his circular chair with the decisive air of a man whose chair was a thing of considerable market value, and that he was unaccustomed to have disregarded.

. 273

. 286

For a long moment Frances Grant kept silent as she meditatively drew the furry tails of her sable stole through her black-gloved fingers. Her piquant face was grave, her downcast blue eyes

. 297●

introspective. She was a wretched mathematician and her thoughts were far astray in a bewildering miscalculation.

. 305

“How much did you say would be left after all the other legatees had been paid their bequests in full?” she asked at last.

“Only enough to yield you an income of a hundred and fifty pounds a year—more or less. Probably less, as the money-market looks at present

" Well—one could live on a hundred ; year ? "

Miss Grant made the statement with interrogation, as though her conviction the possibility of the act required strengt

Chauncery cast an appraising glance graceful young figure whose costly mo supplemented by the varied append gold purse, black enamel and diamond ; expensive umbrella—that rank as neces a woman accustomed to the niceties of he made laconic reply :

" *One* might. *You* couldn't, my dear

There was a sparkle of defiance in l soft blue eyes, a hint of challenge in t jerk of her brown-gold head, as sh briskly :

" At any rate, Tom, I'm going to tr

" But only think what it means. . sincere regard for the worldly well-be client, who had the added claim of r Chauncery condescended to special " Three sovereigns a week for everythin pocket-money, remember ; not even alone, but for *everything*. The mere ef within your means would transform you into a perpetual struggle—a misery of grinding economies. Though I know believe it, at present you have absolut of the actual value of money. You hav vague conception of what striving to gentlewoman on a mere pittance mean

" But I do, Tom. I really do. Th:

## GOOD ADVICE WASTED

want to undertake it myself, rather than condemn older people to the struggle. Oh, Tom! Just imagine what a terrible blow would fall upon those poor old things, who were so delighted at the prospect of receiving uncle's money, if they found the legacies he had so thoughtfully bequeathed to them cut down to a fraction!"

"But you forget that when Sir Alan made his will matters were different. At that time all his bequests could have been paid in full without in the smallest degree encroaching upon your inheritance. Since then, between depreciation of stock, so-called speculative losses, and, as you know, the failure of that sugar planter to whom Sir Alan had advanced a very large sum, the value of his estate has decreased to a fourth. Do you for an instant believe that your uncle would have bequeathed any one of these good folks—old Rankin, Mrs. Borlin, the Scrivins, and all his other pensioners—a solitary farthing had he guessed they were to benefit at your expense?"

"Poor old Dr. Rankin!" Womanlike, Mrs. Grant failed to view the legatees as a group. Her mental vision insisted upon regarding each item thereof as an individual entity. "He called on the hotel this morning to see me. The tears were streaming down his face when he spoke of Uncle Alan and of his goodness to him. He confessed that year by year the number of his pupils had dwindled until he dreaded to think of what the future held. Now, imagining himself secure in his little fortune, he has shaken off the burden of all those sordid years, and is looking forward to accomplishing the dream of his life, and taking

trip round the world. 'I've spent most in a corner of London, and I want to see of the beauties of this world before I have it for another,' he said. I invited him luncheon, and his pockets were simple with prospectuses of the different steamships. He shewed them to me, and asked my advice. He speaks of visiting St. Hertha. He was uncle's grave. . . . Tom, I know it may be idiotically and culpably foolish, but I have the heart to condemn the old man's life in the penal servitude of meanly-paid I should hate every sovereign I spent up if it were gained by depriving another.'

"But apart from the emotional, there is a side to consider, and that is what Sir Alan have wished. Just before his death he had been aware that his investments had seriously lost value. In the last letter I received from him arrived after the cabled news of his death, he mentioned that when he returned to England his first task for me would be the drawing-up of a will. Knowing how matters had changed, he wished as far as possible to secure you against diminution. You know how much he was due to him."

Frances's eyes were dim. "Dear, dear," she murmured dreamily. Her thoughts had flown far away from the spacious dingy office to that far-off West Indian island within sound of the surf-beat, her uncle asleep. "Dear Uncle Alan. He never thought of himself at all. He never did an unselfish

## GOOD ADVICE WASTED

"Yes. But he did not mean you to wreck life through following his Quixotic example. Chauncery made earnest protest. "Frances, sensible girl, and endeavour to consider the matter solely from a commonsense standpoint. I do not wish to take less than your inheritance if you will agree to share and share alike with the other leg. Doing that will ensure you an income on which you would be able to live in comparative comfort and at the same time it will leave the other leg decidedly better off than they were before they received the benefit of Sir Alan's bequests."

For a moment Frances wavered. Then she raised her head with renewed resolution.

"I'm afraid I can't do it, Tom. If you only read the letters of heartfelt thanks I have received from some of these old people, you would understand my feeling. In each case they seem to regard the legacy as a direct interposition of Providence in their behalf! I dare not bring distrust to the minds of believing souls by wrenching their little windfall from them. No, Tom; if somebody must be the loser, far better let it be one who is still young and strong, and who has already enjoyed more than her share of the good things of life, than these old creatures whose entire existence has been a constant wrestle with adverse circumstances."

Frances had risen, and stood by the office door, a tall graceful figure in her fashionably cut dress and raiment. Looking up at his obdurate client, Tom, noting the beauty of renunciation that marked her features to a new expression, Chauncery smiled that, however greatly as legal adviser he

disapprove of his wife's cousin, as a man perforce admire her.

"But I must not squander too much valuable time in asking advice that I refuse upon. Besides, with a prospective income of five pounds a week I can't afford to keep my *compé* waiting too long—can I?"

As he rose, Chauncery, ignoring her outburst, put the question that several times during the interview had risen to his lips.

"Do you think Mason Trent will approve my decision?"

Frances flushed hotly.

"I know he will. At least—I *think*."

The amended phrase came in answer to the implied doubt in Chauncery's expression. If she was not quite so assured of Trent's cooperation as she wished to appear.

"Should you not wait to consult him before making your action final?"

Chauncery was determined to lose no opportunity of combating his client's reckless generosity.

Frances shook her head.

"No. He can hardly be back in London by the March. His last letter said he had no idea when he would be free to leave St. Petersburg. It would be cruel to delay the settlement of his affairs. If he had been in England it would have been different. Besides," she added with a self-deprecating laugh, "I don't acknowledge that Mr. Trent has any right to criticize my actions!"

"Nothing yet, perhaps, but—?" Clarendon paused, an implied interrogation in his tone.

## GOOD ADVICE WASTED

“ Well—perhaps,” smiled Frances, as, drawing her furs round her shoulders, she prepared to depart. “ Don’t forget to give my love to Cynthia when she returns.”

As Chauncery, standing bare-headed on the pavement, watched the *coupé* drive off, he experienced for once a keen regret at the temporary absence of his wife.

“ Bad luck, Cynthia being at Brighton,” he thought. “ She might have persuaded Frances not to impoverish herself for people who’ll neither understand nor appreciate the sacrifice she has determined to make. Trent too would have been of use. There’s nothing Quixotic about that. But he’s out of reach. I’ll telegraph for Cynthia.”

Frances, meanwhile unconscious of Mr. Chauncery’s resolve, was congratulating herself on the very subjects of his regret.

“ What a mercy Cynthia Chauncery isn’t in town. If she had been, she’d move heaven and earth to have me proved incapable of managing my own affairs ! ”



## CHAPTER II

### ONE RAT LEAVES

AS she drove westwards through the streets of London on the evening of the January evening, Frances, within the narrow confines of the smart *coupé*, was feeling as though during her journey with Tom Chauncery her little world had become topsy-turvy.

She had left Ominey's Hotel immediately after her luncheon to keep the appointment with her mother, but so much seemed to have happened since she left that so vital a change had passed over her and her life of the future, that as she drove along Oxford Street it amazed her to learn from a street clock that it was not yet four.

As the uniformed porter threw open the door, and Frances entering, felt her feet sink on the soft rich carpet, and noted with quick interest the quiet luxury of the appointments, which had become so familiar, the sudden realization that henceforward they would rank as beyond her reach brought the first swift sense of what the relinquishment of fortune would mean.

Ominey's was the only London hostel she had ever known. On his occasional visits to England Alan had always patronized it, and naturally she had gone there upon landing. The hotel

—or rather owned, for Ominey's had never required to learn the uses of advertisement—the advantages, rare in a metropolitan hotel, of seclusion and selectness. Consequently it made no pretentious claim to cheapness.

Her little third-floor sitting-room reached, Frances sank into a low chair by the fire, and, unfastening her furs, sought to readjust the balance of her ideas.

She felt almost astonished to find the room exactly as she had left it a couple of hours earlier, just as on her way back from Lincoln's Inn she had been surprised to discover that the news destined to change the whole current of her future had occupied so short a space in the telling. In life the events that count occur quickly without presage. It is the unimportant affairs that spin out the years.

One hundred and fifty pounds a year—what could one do with a sum like that? For certain chaotic moments Frances felt hopeless, as though the notion of subsisting upon so meagre a pittance were an impossibility.

She was lost in a bewildering whirl of thought when a quick step and the sudden flash of the electric light heralded the appearance of her maid, who, believing her mistress still absent, had entered to attend to the fire.

With a murmured apology, Pridham presented a note on a salver, then relieving Frances of her fur toque and stole,—handling the sables with the reverent care of one who knows their value,—carried them off to the adjoining bedroom.

Frances opened the missive languidly. She felt as though the future held few surprises for her. It

proved to be her hotel bill for the past sum total was not in any way exorbitant. In getting the amount of comfort, even elegantly presented, it would hardly even be termed excessive. Frances experienced a swift throb of anxiety as she realized that did she continue at Ominey's she would be living at the rate of four times her weekly income.

Nerved with the courage born of necessity, Frances rushed into action, as Pridham, bearing a pair of slippers, knelt on the floor at her mistress's feet, and, moving with the bred of usage, began to unbutton her boots. "Pridham . . . I'm afraid I must let you unbutton my own boots." Though she tried to treat the difficult subject easily, even to herself, her voice sounded strained and unnatural. "I saw my solicitor to-day he told me there were heavy losses . . . values have depreciated. . . . My property will be much less than I had expected."

Pridham's smooth pale face revealed more than mild curiosity as she emitted a smile expressive of polite sympathy.

"I'm afraid I shall be obliged to part with you . . . But I shall be able to recommend you. You will easily find a new situation."

To her employer's mingled chagrin and surprise Pridham's opening question revealed the inexplicable lack of personal affection in modern servitors, her mutable mind was complacently adapting itself to its changed circumstances.

Cognizant of the composure wherewith

customarily met the unusual, Frances did not expect her announcement to be received with tears and protestations of devotion. Yet she was scarcely prepared to hear her inquire without a tremor in the quiet voice :

“ And when will it suit you to dispense with my services, ma'am ? ”

It was left to Frances to reveal reluctance at the coming severance of the connection.

“ I am so sorry, Pridham, but I fear it must be soon, very soon indeed. You see each day we remain here adds considerably to my expenses. But . . . and of course I will recompense you for lack of notice.”

Frances had approached the question of money with instinctive shrinking. To her surprise, Pridham did not appear to view it with the same delicacy. Self-preservation is the first great law, and naturally Pridham's primary care lay in the protection of her monetary interests.

“ You will allow board wages, of course, ma'am ? ” she asked blandly, as, the slippers adjusted, she stood, boots in hand, ready to leave the room.

“ I suppose so. . . if necessary. . . . I shall see,” Frances made disjointed reply. All she craved was solitude to enable her to recover her grip of things—peace in which to rearrange her future upon entirely new lines.

Her vagrant thoughts recalled a half-forgotten conversation with her uncle when, in unwontedly grave mood, he had insisted upon discussing what then seemed such a vague, far-away possibility. “ Were I to die, Fanny, you would have little more

than eight or nine hundred a year. I you could live comfortably on that? been accustomed to much more, reme

As Governor of St. Hertha, Sir Alan enjoyed a handsome income. His imdecessor, who had carefully husbanded and was not above indulging in a little trading, was still enjoying his reti supplemented by a large private hoar

Sir Alan was a man of different cal holding an office he esteemed it a dut its emolument to upholding the tradit of his Government, and to sustaini tation for hospitality.

With the love for planning significant dispositions that foresee nothing but su coming years, Frances and he, as the e their period of exile drew near, usec their coming life in England, and f they would contrive to make the most retiring pension and his private mean

Sir Alan's idea of the simple life m spent in a good hunting county, sp Riviera, summers in London, autumns :

"But we will require to be precious Fan," he would say half jestingly. "can tell you, to have free quarters an of one's income chopped off. I'm afraid bit extravagant. Ought to have s Gillington feathered his nest pretty s damn it all, I couldn't let those fello were a cheese-paring lot—could I?"

And Frances, laughing, would assen

they were reduced to starvation point, they could sing duets in the street, in front of her uncle's club for choice.

It is easy to make merry respecting purely problematical privations. Now that the serious necessity presented itself, Frances felt keenly the lack of one with whom to discuss it. Had Pridham revealed even the smallest sign of sympathy, had she shewn anything except an overweening concern for her own welfare, Frances might have consulted her, might have sought information as to a cheaper method of existence.

Her girlhood having been passed at Continental boarding schools, and her more recent years spent at St. Hertha, Frances had no intimate friends in England. Cynthia Chauncery was her only relative, and never were relatives more variant of disposition.

On hearing of her cousin's intended return to London, Cynthia had been profuse in commiseration, almost insistent in proffers of hospitality. The sympathy Frances had accepted gratefully, though she declined the hospitality in favour of the seclusion of the hotel. She knew that with her still aching heart, and in her sombre garments, she would be out of harmony with the gay company wherewith Mrs. Chauncery liked to surround herself.

Cynthia, as Frances knew, was her natural consultant ; but she was also fully aware that Cynthia would be the last person to appreciate that sentiment of reverence for the wishes of the dead and compassion for the disappointments of the living that induced her thus rashly to beggar herself.

Tom Chauncery, whose opinion Frances esteemed highly, looking at the matter from the point of view of a practical man, entirely disapproved of her contemplated action.

There was another. As, sitting alone in the firelight, her thoughts turned to him, Frances's cheeks flushed to the signal of her swift heart-beats.

For several months prior to Sir Alan's death Mason Trent, a young Englishman with aspirations towards rising in the diplomatic service, had acted as his private secretary. Trent's was not an expansive nature, yet during the shock of her sudden bereavement he had revealed a scarce expected tenderness that had deeply touched Frances's lonely heart. Though they had entered into no engagement,—and Frances respected the refinement of feeling that restrained Trent from making love to her over her uncle's grave,—there existed between them an understanding that ranked very near to one.

Trent, Frances believed to be a man of exalted ideals. She refused to allow herself to doubt his community of spirit in this matter. In any case, as he had remained at St. Hertha to await the arrival of Sir Alan's successor, there was no possibility of consulting him before taking irrevocable action.

No, the only person with whom she could confer was herself. And at the moment the only point Frances was clear upon was that she must speedily find a cheaper mode of subsistence than life at a West End hotel.

One hundred and fifty pounds a year meant

## ONE RAT LEAVES

seemed  
int of  
of her

in the  
nces's  
heart-

death  
ations  
acted  
nsive  
eave-  
rness  
heart.  
nt,—  
eeling  
her  
ween  
ar to

alted  
t his  
e, as  
rival  
ility  
tion.  
onfer  
oint  
edily  
at a

seant

three pounds a week for fifty weeks in the year  
nothing at all for the remaining two.

She had scribbled the amounts down on  
back of the envelope that had contained the  
bill, and was trying to discover what propo-  
of the sum she might allot to mere board and lodg-  
and how much to other expenses, when Pridham  
returned to arrange a little table for tea. To  
the tray from the waiter she placed it on the  
edged cloth, and moved a vase of mimosa from  
place on a cabinet.

"Tea is served, ma'am." Frances's supersens-  
soul shrank before a fancied change of inflec-  
an imagined loss of deference in Pridham's v-  
"And would it inconvenience you to see a lady  
afternoon?"

For a moment Frances failed to grasp her mea-  
"See a lady! What lady?" she inq-  
blankly.

"With reference to my character, ma'am.  
hotel clerk did me the service to speak for m-  
Mrs. O'Shon."

"The hotel clerk?" Frances was bewild-  
"How did he know I had dismissed you?"

Pridham cast her dark eyes meekly downw-

"I took the liberty of mentioning it, ma-  
thinking it might be an object to you if I was st-  
quickly."

Memory drew Frances a vague picture of  
O'Shon as the overblown spouse of a small  
husband. A matron whose fleshy arms and  
were utilized as a show-ground for the displa-  
jewels, which, beautiful in themselves and co-



were apt to look vulgar and meretricious displayed.

"You can let Mrs. O'Shon know that her in an hour," she gave weary assent.

Punctually to the minute Mrs. Mrs. ex-Senator O'Shon, as she is to be designated—arrived. She proved a dame of Irish extraction and of a rearing. A score of years earlier she had embellished a basement. Under change she was a hippopotamic blot on the landscape.

Recognizing a lady in Miss Grant, and a desire to appear at ease rendered her voluble.

"It's your maid I've come about. I told you. I've had to part with my maid. She used to be all right, but lately she's become impudent! But I hate changes. You don't believe it to look at me, but the bare idea of a stranger makes me hot and cold. I was put up with her, till this morning the Senator gave her a back answer. He's no good at standing any nonsense. He packed her off. The Senator is a man of action—that's what the papers called him, 'The Man of Action.' When he was in office, *Judge* had a cartoon of him marching through the streets with a shillelagh, and he was knocking down all the abuses. Perhaps you saw it here?"

Frances having uttered a polite negation, Mrs. O'Shon retraced her thoughts to the result of the interview.

"Well now, about your woman—Pride

she say her name was? Seeing you about the hotel, I've always admired the way she dressed you and did your hair. I presume it's your own? Yes, I thought so. Well, mine isn't. . . ." Mrs. O'Shon made the somewhat unnecessary admission in the whisper of confidence. "My hair faded early, and when we got on I didn't want to look an old woman, for the Senator's sake, so I got this." She passed a podgy, much-be-ringed hand over her elaborately dressed wig. "Though I must allow that sometimes I think the shade doesn't become me. But about this Pridham now. She says she's been two years with you. I guess if she has suited you that long, she'll suit me right enough. She says she's leaving you at once. Could she come to me to-night?"

Something caught Frances's breath. To-night!

The never-answered conundrum of Mistress and Maid again confronted her. After two years of close personal service, years throughout which she had received every consideration and kindness that generous hearts could devise and affluent purses afford, could it be possible that Pridham was ready, indeed eager, at the first hint of diminished resources, to leave her without even a fleeting regret? "Surely," she thought, "Pridham might have waited until I had shewn signs of making arrangements for the future, before hastening to secure another situation."

"To-morrow *might* do; but I asked your maid if she was sure you would be willing to part with her so soon." Misunderstanding her silence, the Senator's lady blundered on. "And she told me that

the way matters were, you would consider it an advantage."

"Yes, I suppose I ought to consider it so."

Frances's tone was colourless. A sense of blankness oppressed her soul. She knew that she ought to esteem this timely release from the expense of a special attendant as a distinct benefit. Yet somehow she could not throw off the crushing sense of ingratitude. Had Pridham revealed even the slightest trace of personal affection, Frances would gladly have shared her last crust with her. She wondered dully if it could be through any defect in herself—if she lacked the power of inspiring attachment, when Pridham was so ready to sever the tie that bound them.

"You see, it's like this"—Mrs. O'Shon was again confidential—"that Marthe, she's played me a dirty trick. When the Senator told her to go, she mixed up all my things. Put bodices in one place, skirts and things in another. She did it just to spite me, and us going to Paris, Saturday, and all the packing to do. Then there's that big dinner at the Cecil to-morrow night, and however I'll get into my clothes without help I don't know. If you could only let her come to-morrow—For to-night I guess I can eat in my own room."

Thus urged, Frances promised that on the morrow Pridham would exchange the care of herself and her wardrobe for that of the body and belongings of the ex-Senator's lady. Which pledge that perturbed dame received with heartfelt thanks, and the assurance that when the Senator returned from his visit to the Registry Offices and found his wife already suited with a maid, he would be "a surprised man."

## CHAPTER III

### AT A HOTEL-PENSION

MRS. O'SHON had gone, and just as Frances was feeling as though she had come to a loose end of her cord of life, as though for lack of guiding line she must stumble on blindly into the future, her idle gaze fell upon an advertisement on the back of a morning paper :

"BRANDRETH RESIDENTIAL HOTEL PENSION,  
"90, RATIGAN SQUARE, BLOOMSBURY.

"Suitable for those accustomed to refined surroundings. Heated by hot water radiators. Unrivalled cuisine served at separate tables. Terms from 30s. a week, including breakfast and dinner, tea, electric light, baths, service. Highest recommendations. Apply, Manageress."

She read it idly—uncomprehending—filled with a vague wonder that one could offer and another expect to obtain so much for so small a sum. Then its possible adaptation to her own needs occurring to her, Frances reread the paragraph in a new light.

Thirty shillings a week! Suppose board and lodging cost her only seventy-eight pounds a year, there would still remain quite seventy pounds to spend upon clothes, travelling, tips, and all those trifling items of outlay whose cost, taken individually, seems so little, yet which, reckoned collectively, manages to absorb the greater portion of one's income.

Her nebulous, scarce yet formulated dread that poverty might force her to associate with uncongenial strangers was satisfactorily combated by the printed assurance that guests were served at "separate tables."

Frances had always been governed by impulse. Within half an hour of reading the advertisement she had dispatched a note by special messenger to enquire if the Manageress of the Brandreth Hotel-Pension could promise her a vacant room for the morrow.

After the messenger had departed, she remembered that she had omitted to name any reference. On its own behalf the hotel-pension offered the "highest references." Frances wondered if it would demand like exalted sponsors for her respectability ; and with a dreary spasm of amusement decided that of course the term "highest" with respect to reference could only rightly apply to those furnished by the King himself !

But as Frances speedily discovered, the management of Brandreth House was quite prepared, without having seen her, and without even a suggestion of preliminary inquiry as to whether her social or personal qualifications fitted her for mingling with the other inmates of their refined establishment, to accept her as a guest.

Within an incredibly short time the messenger-boy returned bearing a reply wherein the Manageress stated that the only vacant apartment at Brandreth House was a second-floor bedroom which could not be let for less than six shillings a day ; or if engaged by the week, for thirty-five shillings weekly.

Frances sighed a little over the additional sum. Already each shilling was beginning to assume an importance quite out of proportion to its actual monetary value. Five shillings a week mounted up to thirteen pounds a year, and thirteen pounds was a considerable slice to cut from the seventy pounds reserved for incidental expenses. Still, as she eagerly argued with herself, if she could contrive to live respectably upon something under two pounds a week, it would be an achievement worthy of self-congratulation.

Then, seized with sudden apprehension lest during the momentary delay the second-floor bedroom might be snapped up, and she lose the chance of its haven, Frances hastily wrote and sent off a note engaging the room for a week from the following afternoon. That accomplished, she dressed with a somewhat lightened heart, and went down to dinner.

Sitting at her reserved table in a retired corner of the hotel dining-room, Frances questioned wistfully if ever again she would be able to regard as her due the handsome surroundings, the dainty table-appointments, the subtle service, the perfection of cookery, all the individual elements that went to the making of the atmosphere of unostentatious luxury.

As she ate she wondered, indifferently, how the catering of her new lodging would compare with that of Ominey's Hotel. The fact that the newspaper advertisement—which certainly had not erred on the side of modesty—had proclaimed the cuisine “unrivalled,” brought the recollection of her uncle's favourite anecdote about the old Northerner who declared that all published information must be

true—"for they wouldna daur tae print a lee." And a fellow-guest, seated where he could see the rose-shaded light softly illumine Frances's queenly head, was surprised to notice a momentary smile flit over her grave face.

In common with those who are accustomed to fare sumptuously, Miss Grant held a firm conviction that mere gastronomic delights held no attraction for her. Just now the belief that she cared not a pin-point what she ate or drank afforded a species of hollow consolation.

"And at any rate, I shall still be able to sit alone," she thought, with the credence of inexperience pinning her faith to the plausibilities of the printed promise.

The following afternoon saw Frances trundling in a four-wheeler Bloomsbury-wards. The earlier portion of the day had been spent in superintending Pridham's packing of her boxes. It did not occur to her that there might be some difficulty in finding room for such bulky luggage in her new habitation.

Frances had lunched alone, too excited at the near prospect of her excursion into the unknown to eat. Then came the paying of her hotel bill, and the settling up with Pridham. If a half thought crossed her mistress's mind that, with a situation ready to step into, Pridham might have refused to accept the month's wages tendered in place of notice, she did not utter it. And Pridham, whose motto probably was: "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," complacently pocketed the money, and without even delaying to see her late employer off the premises, promptly descended in the lift to the first floor suite of rooms occupied by the O'Shons,

leaving Frances an added consciousness of her friendless position as companion in her journey to her new home.

As the cab, over-weighted with luggage, ponderously approached Bloomsbury, there came to Frances an impression of unrelieved gloom. The streets were narrow and the houses high. In the winter dusk the driver appeared to have a difficulty in locating the particular square in which Brandreth House was situated.

Peering anxiously through the cab windows as she drove slowly past, Frances noted the seemingly endless rows of houses of solemn respectability, most of which had a card, whose lettering she could not read, suspended in the ground floor windows.

Just as she was beginning to feel hopeless of ever reaching her destination, the four-wheeler pulled up with a jerk in front of a house bearing a strong family resemblance to the others. It even displayed the almost universal card which, a closer survey shewed, bore the terms emblazoned in gilt lettering: "*Board Residence.*" Such, Frances decided, was evidently the accepted term for the accommodation to which her weekly thirty-five shillings entitled her.

She had a confused impression of gaining admittance to a hall whose pervading odour was one foreign to her—later she knew it to be that composite atmosphere of exhausted airs peculiar to a dwelling that heats by radiation, cooks by gas, and pays scant attention to ventilation.

The Swiss waiter—who wore evening dress, and had his shirt-front protected by a not over-clean pocket-handkerchief—hastened out to superintend



the unloading of her boxes, in which labour he was assisted by a juvenile satellite in a green baize apron ; while the manageress, a spare, black-robed female, whose expression was a puzzling amalgamation of superficial affability and ingrained anxiety, welcomed the new-comer to Brandreth House.

To the surprise of its owner, the luggage that, measured by the larger proportions of the West End hotel, had seemed modestly unobtrusive, when hemmed in by the narrow limits of the Bloomsbury hall, resolved itself into a formidable and aggressive stack, whose disposal became the subject of much whispered consultation between the manageress and the active waiter.

“ If you don't require all these trunks upstairs, Miss Grant, some of them might be stored in the basement box-room.”

“ But I really hardly know in which of the boxes the things I may require are packed ! ”

The manageress met Frances's admission with the ready adaptability of one whose life is spent in making compromises.

“ Well, if you must have them all upstairs, perhaps we can find room for one or two on the landing. Now I know you'd like to see your room. Alphonse, when you have served tea, see that Miss Grant's luggage is brought up to the second floor back.”

The second floor back was small. Its fittings were gay with a species of tawdry gaiety. The wall-paper of roses lavishly festooned on a buff ground, accorded but ill with the chocolate-hued paint. The suite of white enamelled furniture had evidently seen more distinguished service before finding its

present location in the second floor back of a Bloomsbury boarding-house. The only articles on the broad mantelshelf were two chipped vases and an ugly little clock that had long ago abandoned any attempt to keep pace with the times. Skimpy maroon repp curtains failed to disguise the fact that closed folding-doors connected the room with the second floor front. The chamber presented the cheerless impersonal aspect common to rooms that are nobody's or anybody's.

In her mental picture of her Bloomsbury apartment Frances had unconsciously fancied it similar to one she had once occupied during a holiday run to Paris. That chamber, in an old-fashioned hotel on the Quai Voltaire, had been a happy combination of bed and sitting-room, with three tall lace-festooned windows overlooking the Seine, a room whereof during the day one could easily ignore its night uses. In her cramped Bloomsbury lodging the bed—an article of furniture in the French room so discreetly relegated to a draped alcove—was clumsily obtrusive. Jutting out into the middle of the room, it seemed to usurp the greater portion of the floor space.

“You will find the sitting-rooms delightfully warm.” In the chill atmosphere of the unused apartment even the politic manageress failed to repress an involuntary shiver. “The public rooms and the hall are heated with hot-air radiators. Tea is ready now in the dining-room.”

The prospect of immediate tea was distinctly alluring. Without waiting to remove her hat, Frances descended in quest of it.

## CHAPTER IV

### IN REFINED SURROUNDINGS

THE dining-room proved to be a long narrow apartment, stretching from two windows looking on to Ratigan Square to one window that, had the glass not been discreetly opaque, would have revealed the mysterious territory situated at the rear of the building.

Numerous small green-topped tables inconveniently crowded the circumscribed floor-space. To reach without collision the seat indicated by the alert Alphonse, Frances had to thread her way carefully.

In the dim light she saw several ladies clustered around the tables nearest the front windows. Among them was the manageress, who, with solicitous attention to the various likes and dislikes of the guests, was dispensing tea.

Having taken a place at a table a little removed from the other boarders, Frances was speedily served with tea of the brand largely advertised as making a "good second cup." To the eye the swart decoction looked incredibly strong; to the palate it seemed incredibly weak and void of flavour. The buttered bread that was its sole accompaniment Frances welcomed, for in the bustle and excitement of removal she had taken little luncheon. Un-

fortunately her fastidious taste adjudged the provender inferior, though she could hardly analyse in what respect it differed from the bread and butter of Ominey's Hotel.

The electric light had not yet been turned on. Frances got only a vague idea of the personality of the women whom she saw silhouetted against the winter twilight. To her relief, none gave any evidence of having noticed her presence.

Tea over, Frances reascended to her room, to find the two largest of her trunks, one placed on the top of the other, encumbering the landing. The three others blocked the limited floor-space of her chamber. At first sight it seemed as though she could neither get in nor out.

For a moment Frances gazed at them aghast, undecided whether to laugh or to cry. Then summoning up her courage, she threw off her hat and furs and began unpacking. When reviewing the sacrifices incumbent upon her reduced resources, she had accounted the relinquishment of a maid's services as the least. Already she was discovering that the Pridhams of life have their indubitable uses.

By six o'clock the wall-cupboard was filled with dresses, the drawers of the duchesse toilet-table were crammed with lingerie, and three of the trunks were emptied, ready for conveyance to the retirement of the box-room. And Frances was so cold that, in order to get warm before dressing for dinner, she went down-stairs in search of a fire.

Opening the door of a room that she rightly guessed to be the drawing-room, she was met by a breath of suffocatingly hot airless air.

The room, which was small, had been lavishly stocked with ornate furniture. The fireplace was draped in yellow brocade festooned with cords and tassels. It displayed a stained-glass fire-screen, a brass muffinstand, the full complement of fire-irons. The sole element lacking was the one that Frances esteemed essential—the fire.

Bowing tentatively to the only occupant of the room—an old lady in a gay cap who, cowering close to the radiator, was warming her shrivelled hands at its hollow comfort, Frances looked about for something to read.

To her disappointment the printed matter available proved to be that epitome of respectability the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a pile of fragmentary music chiefly of a popular description, and a few stray copies of periodicals that a superficial study revealed to be devoted to the laudation of second-rate hotels, cheap boarding-schools, and establishments of the standing of Brandreth House.

“Don’t you think they might allow us a fire?” The plaintive note of the old lady had broken the silence. “I would so enjoy seeing a fire again. These heaters make the rooms so stuffy without really warming one. My head is always hot here, and my feet cold.”

“But is there never an open fire here?” Frances asked in incredulous dismay.

“One can have a bedroom fire, of course, but that is an extra, and it comes expensive—oh! very expensive indeed.”

Before Frances had opportunity of ascertaining the precise monetary value set by the management

of Brandreth House upon bedroom fires, they were joined by a showily-attired lady who, as Frances speedily learned, came from Salisbury, and was residing at the boarding-house during her stay in London for the express purpose of undergoing some mysterious medical attention, to which she somewhat proudly referred as "my treatment."

The new-comer proved communicative to a degree. Frances found herself perforce listening and murmuring sympathetic monosyllables while the lady from Salisbury recounted highly illuminating—if decidedly embarrassing—detail regarding the workings of her internal organization to the chilly old dame and herself.

Essaying to dress for dinner, Frances found the hot water tepid, and her unpacking having been distinguished more for speed than system, and the solitary electric light being dim, she experienced some delay in making her toilet. The dinner-gong had sounded before she was ready to go downstairs.

Entering the dining-room, she discovered a number of fellow-boarders seated at the little tables, whose sportive green tops were now covered by demure white cloths.

Alphonse, who had performed his evening toilet by the simple action of removing the handkerchief that, during the day, had shielded his expanse of shirt-front, hastening forward, guided Frances to her seat. Alas for expectation of a table to herself! The ruling power of Brandreth House, in the evident belief that thereby it was adding to the happiness of its guests, made a point of, so far as possible, plac-

between his shirt-front and waistcoat. Though as there was no choice of so little meaning in the ceremony.

"Yes. Soup," Frances assented. Her napkin over her knees, she sat back and began silently to observe the company.

At the table nearest the radiator sat the chilly old lady, her pinched face and ribboned cap looking wan and grey in the electric light. She was accompanied so gratuitously plain of feature that she wondered that she troubled to powder and darken her eyebrows. She appeared the passage of the insidious years, for she was dressed in girlish fashion with only a slight tendency to middle-aged elegance, rigidly compressed within the confines of a fronted corset, and girdled by an inflexible girdle.

At the farther end of the room the manageress carved assiduously, while his youthful assistant, Gustave, served

Gustave was forced to present the dishes at her right hand, there being no means, short of leaping the table, of reaching her left side.

The food was plentiful and not unappetizing, through Frances was amused to discover that where there was a variety of dishes the diners were expected to restrict their choice to one or other. Seeing her table companion who had selected ginger pudding served with a slab of drab-hued suet crust smeared with cold syrup, Frances chose the alternative sweet which the menu laconically designated "pine-apple," and found herself helped to certain cubes of the tinned fruit, a not particularly tempting dainty for a cold January night.

If Frances felt aggrieved by the presence of another at her table, her *vis-à-vis* very evidently regarded her appearance as an unjustifiable intrusion. He replied briefly to her tentative remark regarding the weather. There the conversation ended.

In the drawing-room after dinner, the lady from Salisbury—who had changed her showy walking costume for an even showier evening gown, without, as Frances could not avoid noticing, troubling to change the dark petticoat she had worn during the day—hospitably invited the stranger to take a hand at bridge. Frances declined to play. She did not feel composed enough to be able to concentrate her thoughts upon the game. She preferred to spend her evening, book in hand, striving to adjust her ideas to their new focus.

The bridge quartette—the lady from Salisbury, Mrs. Canvey, a deaf young man, and the obliging manageress—speedily became engrossed in their



game. In the dining-room, which the mere whisking off of the white cloths had transformed into a recreation room, the younger members of the party, amongst whom Miss Canvey rated herself, were having a lively round game. Left to her own thoughts, Frances found herself already wondering how she was to fill in the empty days that lay before her. It seemed as though with change of fortune all occupations and interests had deserted her. For lack of better employment she was beginning to pity herself, when a pretty anæmic girl who had dined at an adjoining table sauntered listlessly into the drawing-room, looking like a tall pale lily in her white gown.

She was inclined to be communicative, in a plaintive key. A fugitive remark from Frances respecting the Christmas decorations that, shrivelled and dusty, still clung to the picture frames and over-mantel, sufficed to elicit the harrowing fact that she had spent Christmas at the almost deserted boarding-house. In a yet more lachrymose tone she added the information that she was quite alone in London.

"I don't eat, either," she added, in response to Frances's murmured condolence. "I have no appetite. I think I require more excitement in my life. I am so lonely here."

Her ready sympathy aroused, in her concern for the woe of this disconsolate maiden, Frances forgot her own troubles. As a practical method of consolation she was proposing to teach her a patience game when the entrance of a sleek-haired, self-confident young man who had not been present at dinner brought smiles to the lily maid.

IN REFINED SURROUNDINGS 33

Leaving them chatting together, Frances went upstairs to fetch her patience cards. The quest of the case necessitated the opening of another trunk. Descending ten minutes later, Frances was surprised and not a little disgusted to view from the dark staircase the lily maid giggling in the embrace of the late-comer under the bunch of faded mistletoe that still depended from the hall bracket. Thereafter the pair evidently subsided into a seat in the corner of the dimly lit hall, for there Frances espied them when, an hour later, she went wearily upstairs to her chilly bedroom.

## CHAPTER V

### A NOVICE IN NARROW WAYS

ON her first night in the Bloomsbury boarding-house, Frances experienced a shock from the realization that the little personal comforts that custom had taught her to regard as necessaries would in the future rank as luxuries.

The weapons with which she had hitherto successfully combatted the English winter—the bedroom fire, the eiderdown quilt, the soft fleecy blankets, the hot-water bag encased in its flannel jacket—were all wanting. Frances had determined to do without the fire, but the formidable prospect of undressing in that frigid atmosphere conquered her resolution, and induced her to ring with the intention of ordering a fire to be kindled at once.

Circumstance, however, enforced the economy. No one appeared in answer to her summons. Concluding, at length, that either the connecting wire was broken or that the weary servants had retired to rest, Frances crept, with an irrepressible shudder, into the glacial purity of the sheets.

The day had seemed days long. When she quitted the stuffy drawing-room, Frances felt heavy and drowsy; but the cold, and the insecure feeling awakened by the prospect of passing a night in a strange house with no key to her door,

banished sleep. To her nervously exhausted mind there was something sinister in the knowledge that behind the folding doors other guests, she knew not whom, were located.

As she lay awake she heard the gradual dispersal of the company. Voluble "good-nights" announced the retiral of the card-players. Protracted whispering, broken by half-stifled giggles, bore witness to the lily maid's farewells on the landing, just beside her door.

Without, the surging wail of distant motors seemed to fill the night with melancholy. Under the bed-clothes Frances shivered a little, enduring what she lacked skill in expedient to cure. One more accustomed to roughing it would have made a temporary addition to the scant coverings with a travelling-rug and fur cloak; but so simple a remedy for the ill did not occur to this novice in narrow ways.

Awakening to the gloom of a January morning, Frances lay for a moment in complacent expectation of Pridham entering to bring her early tea, and prepare her bath. But at Brandreth House early tea ranked as an extra, and there was no bedroom bath provided for the occupant of the second floor back.

The view from the window revealed an unbroken line of dingy rears of houses belonging to that social stratum that concentrates its energy and expenditure upon the cleansing and adornment of the front casements, and neglects those that do not meet the public eye.

The owners of the enclosures that, hemmed in

by high brick walls, bore greater resemblance to lidless boxes than to the "gardens" they professed to be, had evidently long given up all idea of trying to cultivate anything. A long-suffering plane tree, grown tall and spindling in its attempts to reach a purer air, was the only vegetation in sight, and it was masked in its winter coat of encrusted soot.

Fastening together with a hairpin the curtains of her unscreened window, Frances, a sense of desolation oppressing her naturally buoyant nature, began the business of dressing. Already she was beginning to realize that the hard part of a voluntary monetary sacrifice does not lie in making up one's mind to the self-immolation, but in the endurance of the endless trifling personal inconveniences and deprivation that follow the relinquishment of the money.

In the dining-room certain of the boarders were already at table, others had evidently fed and left. At a table by a window a big man, seated with his back to the other occupants, was noisily gulping down heaped spoonfuls of porridge. In the corner farthest from draughts and nearest the hot-water radiator, that had become hers by prescriptive right of long residence, sat old Mrs. Canvey, the patient face under her toupee and smart cap looking more wan than ever in the murky atmosphere. Frances's secret wonder why, in place of braving the chill of the winter morning, the old lady did not breakfast cosily in bed, was allayed by the recollection that meals served in bedrooms were charged extra.

Frances was breakfasting on coffee, a sausage

that in point of size threatened to aspire to the proportions of a bolster, and toast that had evidently been made early in the morning, and dried in the oven until its consistency resembled chips, when her table-mate, the Man from the Midlands, as she had mentally christened him, appearing, acknowledged her presence with a sidelong nod and a perfunctory "Good-morning." He had changed his black and yellow necktie for a red one; sewed slippers, with a fox's head embroidered on each toe, had replaced his lacing boots, and his newspaper was white; otherwise there was no apparent difference between his morning toilet and his evening one.

For lack of more engrossing occupation, Frances had proposed spending the morning exploring her new neighbourhood; but driving sleet barred the project, and by keeping her indoors afforded her an opportunity of studying such fellow-guests as had taken refuge in the drawing-room.

The neurotic lady from Salisbury—who wore a walking costume so elaborately embroidered with gimp squiggles that even to be in the same room with it made Frances feel restless—after many flutterings to and from the windows, and repeated conjectures as to whether the sleet would continue, or whether it would obligingly cease in time to allow her to venture forth to her "treatment," had at length, with the aid of the obliging Alphonse and the resounding of reiterated shrill cab-calls, secured a hansom and departed.

The lily maid, who after a languid uninterested fashion essayed to study typewriting, had gone

to her class. The other boarders had all dispersed in various directions, and Frances found herself alone in the company of the Canveys.

Thrown back on their society, she reaped the benefit of their experience of the nomad life that promised to be hers also. From them she learned that Brandreth House might be esteemed a good specimen of its kind; her informants having spent several months under its roof were fully qualified to judge. Their procedure, as she gathered, was to spend the winter, spring and summer in some London boarding-house, migrating in the autumn to a coast establishment of the same class.

"The country must be nicest in early summer. It gets so crowded in autumn," said the old lady. "But Clara says it would be ridiculous to leave town during the season, so we never go before the end of July."

Miss Canvey, as Frances speedily discovered, despite the contradictory evidence offered by her elaborate affectation of juvenility, was an eminently practical person, one who on a small income contrived to live a life of absolute idleness, of shoddy luxury. That in so doing she condemned her mother, the sole craving of whose old age was towards a quiet fireside of her own, to perpetual intercourse with strangers and the dreary monotony of *pension* life, did not weigh with Miss Canvey. She enjoyed the bodily ease and the society of sorts supplied at so small a cost by boarding-house existence, and the mother being of a gentle conciliatory nature, Clara's likings were laws to her.

When Death came it would find Mrs. Canvey

in the top back chamber of some third-rate hotel-pension, her dying brain harassed, maybe, with the consciousness that her illness and impending demise were strictly against the rules of the establishment, and that they would probably figure in the bill as "extras."

To Frances Miss Canvey proved agreeably communicative regarding their fellow-guests.

"Do you play, Miss Grant—or sing? We sometimes have quite a musical evening here. Monsieur Lafosse—you must have noticed him at dinner last night? I'm surprised you didn't, he is so good-looking, and a great ladies' man—might almost be a professional, he sings and play so charmingly."

"Isn't it dreadful," she continued, with an abrupt change of subject, "how Ivy Darlby carries on with Mr. Clintock. Of course you've noticed that? Yes, I thought you would. No one could avoid seeing it. He is studying medicine at University College in Gower Street. Don't you think he has an evil expression? And she is such a silly girl! Any one can see that she is simply infatuated with him."

"It can't end in any good," Mrs. Canvey made dismal prophecy, as she held her wrinkled hands to the warmth of the radiator.

"She seems very young, and quite alone. Should not some one caution her?" suggested Frances.

"That's all very well, but who is to do it?" practical Miss Canvey demanded briskly. "The management won't risk offending two boarders,



and it's none of our places to interfere. We would just get ourselves disliked, and not do a bit of good."

And realizing that Miss Canvey's point of view was the strictly commonsense one, Frances closed the subject with a sigh.

An energetic country matron, whose laudable custom it was to make a half-yearly pilgrimage to town with the express object of renewing the wardrobe of her numerous family, having joined them, Frances, leaving the trio deep in discussion of the merits of the varied drapery establishments, quitted the drawing-room with the intention of venturing out. Returning to fetch a forgotten umbrella, her quick ears caught a sentence or two of conversation.

"They can't possibly be real sables," Miss Canvey was declaring with conviction.

"They look lovely, but there!—they do make such amazing imitations nowadays," the country matron had responded complacently.

Though at the moment the disjointed sentences appeared to have no especial meaning, later reflection suggested to the unwitting eavesdropper that in all probability her own furs had been the subject under consideration,

The sleet had ceased. A little drizzling rain was falling and the streets were wet and greasy. Moving onwards without definite object, Frances found herself confronted by the massive bulk of that national storehouse of garnered wealth and erudition, the British Museum,

Entering, she found its atmosphere peculiarly

disheartening on that dark January day. The relics of the dead oppressed her with a paralyzing sense of her own insignificance. There seemed to have been such unnumbered generations of people since the origin of humanity, moving on and on unceasingly, relentlessly, close on each other's heels. It made her brain reel to attempt to realize them.

"God help the stumblers on life's journey!" she murmured involuntarily. "They must get trodden under foot."

Looking up, she saw the Man from the Midlands walking down the vast hall between the masses of statuary. A catalogue was in his hand, an air of judicial scrutiny on his commonplace features, as though he harboured no prejudice against really antique works of art, but decidedly refused to be deceived by counterfeits.

As he approached, Frances, lowering her veil, drew further into the shadow, and he passed by oblivious of her near presence.

After contriving to lose her way twice within the meagre compass of half a mile, a fact that added to her forlorn feeling, Frances succeeded in returning to Brandreth House.

She found her reappearance greeted by a little flutter of excitement. "A lady had called for her. Such a fashionable lady. In such a smart motor-brougham!"

"Cynthia," Frances opined mentally.

"The lady didn't leave a card," the manageress explained. "Alphonse asked her for one, but she said it didn't matter, you would know who it was; and she'd call again in the afternoon."

“ How like Cynthia not to leave her name ! She did not want it known that she had a relative living in such a locality,” mused Frances, as in the oddly deserted dining-room she fed off such viands, warmed up from the dinner of the previous night, as furnished the luncheon-table.

“ She must have come home unexpectedly. She meant to stay a week longer at Hove. Tom could only get my note with the change of address this morning. Assuredly Cynthia has lost no time in hastening to expostulate !” she thought with a wry smile, and the fore-knowledge that her day of judgment was at hand.

## CHAPTER VI

### A SELF-APPOINTED CENSOR

IT was early afternoon. The increasing rain had kept most of the ladies indoors, and the little drawing-room seemed uncomfortably full. On one end of the sofa the energetic country matron, with frowning brow, was studying intently a piece of string whose length was broken at irregular intervals with mystic knots. Seated at the other end, Frances, her mind hunting some vague recollections of the string messages current amongst Indians, was watching her interestedly, when the matron solved the mystery by remarking that the knots on the string represented the different sizes of feet owned by her home brood, and that the string was destined to serve as her guide in the purchase of their new boots.

Miss Canvey, who, standing by the rain-wet panes, had been conversing with the lady from Salisbury, announced the arrival of Frances's self-appointed censor.

"Here is your friend back again, Miss Grant. What a lovely motor she has!"

And Frances, looking beyond her, gained a glimpse of Mrs. Chauncery, nose in air, descending from her motor-brougham, and found herself realizing

confusedly that if Cynthia had come to scold her she would be obliged to do it in public!

Ushered in with all due impressment by Alphonse, Cynthia, inclining an icy cheek for her cousin's salutation, and pointedly ignoring the presence of the ladies who held themselves ready to return her greeting, cast a comprehensive glance round the room, then inquired in a voice she made no attempt to lower—

“Is there no place where we can be alone? We can't possibly talk in a crowd.”

Her tone suggested not only that the listening ladies constituted a crowd, but a crowd of which each individual member was beneath the attention of one of Mrs. Chauncery's standing.

“I'm afraid there is only my bedroom, Cynthia. Will you come upstairs?”

With a disdainful swish of her long fur-bordered robe, and a jingle of the many trinkets depending from her muff chain and bracelets, Mrs. Chauncery followed her cousin. Surmounting the two stairs, she entered the room wearing an expression of pitying disgust, and taking possession of the only chair, opened the battle with an attempt at strategy.

“Well, Fanny, when I got home last night Tom told me that you had taken some absurd idea into your head—that you spoke of throwing away your money in some ridiculously Quixotic fashion. I was sure you must have been half joking, and that when you had time to consider the matter you would see how ludicrous the notion was. Now, tell me, hasn't a few hours of this appalling hole”—the comprehensive sweep of Mrs. Chauncery's hand

indicated not only the cramped confines of the tawdry room; it included also the entirety of Brandreth House—“wrought a complete cure? Don't you already pine to be back in civilized surroundings?”

“But the thing isn't to do, Cynthia. It is done. I have quite made up my mind, and I'm not going to change it. And coming to this place has just opened my eyes to what people who have very little must endure. Many people would consider life here affluence!”

“But, Fanny, surely you realize that Uncle Alan would never have left the appalling old horrors a penny if he had dreamt that by so doing he was depriving you? Don't you see how pig-headed it is to insist upon giving up the money?”

“Oh, yes. I know all that. Tom and I have threshed it all out. Don't you realize that my action is merely the result of an uneasy conscience, that I would never have a moment's peace if I retained the money and let uncle's poor old pensioners starve?”

“Starve! Nonsense. People of that class always manage to rub along somehow. If they didn't, there wouldn't be such a ridiculous lot of them,” Mrs. Chauncery made peevish retort.

From her seat on the edge of the bed Frances looked thoughtfully at her cousin, weighing her in the balance, and finding her wanting.

Judged physically, Cynthia Chauncery was tall, fair, thin. She had a sweet smile, half a dozen distinct manners, half a hundred inflections of her high-pitched voice. Mentally she was the epitome

of selfishness. She always had abundant funds to devote to her personal gratification: never a sovereign to give away.

Mrs. Chauncery was an admirable manager. Even her social entertaining was conducted upon a solid commercial basis. She expended so much money in the expectation of getting the capital returned with interest. She was extravagant with a purpose; stingy in all matters in which expenditure did not show.

Mrs. Chauncery's inferiors thought her cold and stiff. Those she esteemed her social superiors discovered in her bearing an affability so overwhelming as to border on the sycophantic. She had an irreproachable taste in dress, a superficial smartness of intellect, and one adjective that varied with the times. At present it was "appalling."

Before the knowledge of Sir Alan's losses had reached her, Cynthia had heaped affectionate attentions on her cousin, and had pursued her with invitations to stay with them in Half Down Street; invitations which Frances—sincere herself, and never suspecting interested motives in another—received with gratitude. But her loss was so recent that, not feeling in the mood for gaiety, and knowing the lack of repose that characterized Cynthia's London life, she had preferred to adhere to her original intention of remaining at the quiet hotel until the inevitable business connected with her inheritance had been dispatched.

Cynthia's querulous protest broke in upon her musing.

"Don't you realize in what an appalling position

you are placing yourself? Tom says you won't have a penny more than a hundred and fifty a year. You know you can't possibly exist upon that."

"But, Cynthia, if other people do it, why should not I?"

"Then you do mean to spend your life in a hole like this, associating with all those appalling frumps downstairs. Good Heavens, Fanny! I thought you had more sense of refinement than that!"

No one likes to be rated as lacking in delicacy of feeling. Frances flushed hotly as she replied almost apologetically:

"I am hoping when things get settled up to get a tiny house of my own."

Pity mingled with sarcasm in the laugh with which Mrs. Chauncery greeted the statement. To do her justice, the astute matron had a far clearer notion of ways and means than had her cousin.

"You poor unsophisticated thing! Do you really suppose you could afford any kind of house on that income? Even if you did find one in some unspeakable slum, just imagine what your neighbours would be. And you would have to scrub your own doorstep, for you couldn't possibly pay the wages of even a drab of a maid-of-all-work. Come, Fan dear, do abandon the silly romantic notion and let us stick to our plan of going to Biarritz for the spring."

Cynthia had dropped her note of indignant protest; her voice had taken its most cajoling tone.

"Accept what Uncle Alan wished you to have, and out of that you can do any amount of good to these old people. If they get their legacies in a lump sum they will probably lose them all in silly



speculations. Or else they are certain to die soon, leaving their money to strangers that uncle never intended to benefit. Whereas if you retain control of the capital, you can dole out just what they require. It will be far safer in your hands than in theirs."

There was much of worldly wisdom in Mrs. Chauncery's argument, and for the moment Frances was sorely tempted to agree. Then with an affectation of greater decision than her feelings justified her in exhibiting, she expressed her resolve of adhering to her original intention.

"Don't let us discuss it any more, Cynthia," she said quietly. "My heart will not allow me to keep the money."

"Your heart! If Mason Trent has anything to do with your heart, I'm afraid you'll find him the first person to raise an objection."

Frances flushed, then paled.

"Mr. Trent has no right to criticize my doings."

"But I thought——"

"There is no engagement between us. Please do not refer to him again," Frances interrupted hastily. The nature of the tie existing between the young diplomat and herself was of too delicate a nature to bear discussion.

"Then what on earth are you going to do next?" Mrs. Chauncery's tone had regained its acerbity. "Of course remaining here is out of the question. You couldn't possibly endure it for a week. Tom suggested your coming to live at Half Down Street, but that is impossible, for I shan't return from Biarritz till the end of April—it is mean of you

throwing me over after we had arranged to go together. Now I'll have all the bother of finding some one else to go with me. I'm sending away most of the servants. It would have been absurd to leave them idle for three months, eating their heads off, and squabbling and getting into mischief. Stirret and his wife will act as caretakers, and Tom will pass most of his leisure at his club ; and Nannie must spend her Easter holidays at school. Now don't be obdurate, Fanny," she added, with a sudden return to coaxing. " You know how appalling London is likely to be for the next three months——" With a not wholly simulated shudder she indicated the view, as seen from the window, of the dreary succession of soot-incrusted back walls, and the grimy branches of the dripping plane tree. " Just think of Biarritz, with the blue sky and the flowers, and the sunshine on the sea. . . ."

For a long moment Frances wavered. Her happiest years had been passed under tropical sunshine within sound of the surge of the sea. Return to England seemed to have plunged her into a world of gloom. No other elements appealed to her nature as did sunshine and warmth. She had sometimes thought that had she not been a Christian she would have been an avowed sun and fire worshipper. The only semblance of a deity Cynthia bowed knee before was the modern representative of the Golden Calf.

Frances shook her head ; her eyes were moist, but she spoke bravely.

" Summer will come again even in England. ' It's no aye rainin' on the misty Ochils,' as Uncle Alan used to say. Cynthia, it is good of you taking

all this trouble, and I do hate to seem obstinate and pig-headed; but I know I wouldn't have a single day's peace of mind if I kept the money."

"Well, if you must, you must." Mrs. Chauncery had risen to go. The fatalistic note in her thin voice showed that she recognized the futility of striving against folly. "Only I tell you that if you throw away your money in this appalling fashion, you'll regret it all your life. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The self-appointed censor had gone, leaving a faint perfume of roses in Frances's room, and an added sense of desolation in her soul. Already she was experiencing the bitterness of adhering in cold blood and against opposing forces to a project undertaken in a glow of heroic enthusiasm.

Meanwhile Cynthia, being already so far east, had broken her customary rule of ignoring her husband's professional connexion, and had motored to his office for the express purpose of denouncing the reprehensible obstinacy of one who refused to be influenced by her arguments.

"I shall never attempt to reason with Frances Grant again. I had no idea she would have been so stubborn. But it's always the people who seem sweet and yielding that are so dogmatic and mulish."

"Then you didn't succeed in inducing her to change her mind? You were certain you would, you know."

In commune with his wife, Chauncery used the husband's privilege of direct speech.

"She wouldn't move a hair's breadth. Even although she was living in an appalling place with 'board and lodging' tickets stuck in every window-

pane"—perhaps unconsciously Mrs. Chauncery was given to exaggeration of fact—"I found her in the only sitting-room, which was crowded with the most appalling collection of human misfits God ever made! Such a locality too! I positively hated to have the motor waiting at the door. Fortunately nobody was likely to see it there."

"The poor outraged motor! Its injured feelings have my sincere sympathy!"

Ignoring her husband's irony, Mrs. Chauncery went on.

"Fanny was talking a lot of high-falutin' nonsense about her uncle's starving pensioners. I nearly reminded her—it was on the tip of my tongue several times—that she was only one of Uncle Alan's pensioners herself. You know she simply hasn't a penny of her own. She must have inherited her spendthrift ways and inclination for throwing away money from her parents, for they left nothing—absolutely *nothing*. That was why Uncle Alan adopted her. And apart from that, any woman with a grain of sense would have contrived to lay by something for herself during the five years she kept house at St. Hertha; yet I'm certain she never thought of saving a penny of her housekeeping. But there—what else could you expect from one so appallingly unpractical and improvident as Frances always has been!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MAN FROM THE MIDLANDS

**I**T was on the morning of the fifth day of her stay at the Bloomsbury boarding-house that Frances noticed a change in the bearing of her table-companion.

The attitude of half-suspicious reserve, that aloofness that is the sensible demeanour of the discreet provincial visitor towards the casual stranger with whom chance makes him acquainted in London, had vanished. When Frances appeared at breakfast the Man from the Midlands, temporarily neglecting his porridge, which he ate with sugar, rose to greet her. Abandoning his policy of taciturnity, he opened a conversation, relating such items of interest as he had gleaned from the morning's paper.

Noticing that her fried egg was over-done, he chivalrously signalled to Alphonse, and instructed him to exchange it for a more lightly cooked one.

In the course of the meal he dilated fluently upon the different methods of making tea. The decoction peculiar to Brandreth House he disposed of in one word as "wash."

"Now it's funny the difference there is in making such a simple thing as tea," he began confidentially. "Some people I was visiting last month, their tea

was simply undrinkable ; and, mind you, there were five daughters in the house. And another friend of mine in the same place, her tea is just as different as different. But the secret is that she always makes it herself. She's quite class, though she makes the tea herself. It's not from any want of maids, either, for they keep two, but just because she says it's never satisfactory except she makes it herself."

He further surprised Frances by evincing a tentative interest in her prospective movements. If she had not known the idea to be absurd, she could almost have imagined that he looked disappointed when she said her time would be taken up by an interview with her solicitor.

Probably the fact that Frances made no effort to improve his acquaintance helped to vanquish his carefully inculcated caution. For that same evening at dinner, abandoning any remaining doubt he might have cherished concerning his companion, he became communicative.

"'Rock,' my name is ; Herbert Rock of Diddleswick."

When mentioning his native town, Mr. Rock's tone was so proudly proprietorial, that but for a vague connection with the name, Frances might have imagined him to refer to an estate of which he was the owner. "I thought I'd just mention it. It's a bit awkward talking if you don't know each other's names."

There was a pause. The failure of Frances to return Mr. Rock's confidence arose not so much from any pretension to superiority as her silence

might have induced him to believe, as from the discovery that in laying the table her napkin (table-linen was expected to serve a week at Brandreth House) had been allotted to her companion, who, unconscious of the mistake, had tucked it into his waistcoat. At the moment when Mr. Rock was formally introducing himself she was wondering whether he would esteem her rude did she ask him to exchange it for his own, which in a blue celluloid ring lay beside her plate.

Mr. Rock cleared his throat a little nervously, then courageously asked directly the question he had before put by inference.

"Do you mind telling me what your name is, Miss? I hope you don't think me inquisitive asking, but it's a bit awkward-like, us talking like this and my having to call you 'Miss.'"

"Oh, yes, of course." Frances, becoming suddenly conscious of her remissness, hastened to make amends. "My name is Grant, and I have been so little in England since I was a girl that I'm afraid I can't claim any town as my own."

As she spoke, Mr. Rock, espying that his ring encircled the napkin by her plate, became cognizant of the blunder into which he had been led. For the moment Frances feared he might return her property expecting her to resume the use of it. Fortunately Mr. Rock's innate sense of delicacy prompted him differently. With an imperative wave of the offending article he summoned Alphonse.

"I've had an accident with this lady's serviette. Fetch her a clean one, see?"

Waxing confidential as the meal progressed,

Mr. Rock complained that in London people did not seem to realize how important a town Diddleswick really was. He evidently was experiencing that confused feeling of loss of individuality and decrease of personal importance that oppresses the provincial who is alone in London, and drives him instinctively to impress others with an understanding of the importance of his native town.

Acting upon this impulse, Mr. Rock enlivened the progress of the remaining courses with a detailed description of Diddleswick, its leading manufactures, principal inhabitants, political views, and the increase in the number of the population since his boyhood. And Frances learned that, in the interests of his firm of harness makers, Mr. Rock was in the custom of paying periodic visits to London—"Combinin' pleasure and business, I call it," Mr. Rock explained.

It was when he mentioned that Ruffington Chase, an estate three miles east of Diddleswick, was the home of the famous soldier, Sir Stephen Russell, that Frances discovered the exact nature of the intangible connection that her elusive memory claimed with the name of the town.

Sir Stephen Russell was Mason Trent's half-brother, and, although temporarily occupied by strangers, Ruffington Chase held special interest for Frances as having been the birthplace and boyhood's home of Trent. Sir Stephen not being a married man, and his military duties keeping him much out of England, the Chase with its extensive shootings had been let for a term of years.

That discovery made, Mr. Rock found his confid-



ences received not merely with polite attention as hitherto, but with the keenest interest. If it gratified him to dilate upon the glories of Diddleswick and the surrounding country, it pleased Frances still more to listen.

What matter that the peace of the company was broken by the unappeasable demands of the evil-faced Mr. Clintock for a non-forthcoming half-bottle of stout—a beverage which Alphonse called the aid of all his saints to bear witness Mr. Clintock had consumed on the previous evening—it was the first meal Frances had enjoyed in Brandreth House.

The week dragged slowly past. Cynthia's mission having disastrously failed, she had returned the same night to Hove to complete her visit. And though Frances had occasional interviews with Tom Chauncery they were strictly of a business character. Chauncery did not attempt by any social attentions to make his client's position any easier of endurance. Probably he felt it his duty as a sincere friend, as well as an astute legal adviser, to seek to turn Frances from her purpose by allowing her to become thoroughly disgusted by her mean surroundings.

There was a letter in a shabby envelope lying by Mr. Rock's plate on the top of his folded newspaper when Frances descended to breakfast on the morning of her seventh day at Brandreth House. She was half unconsciously studying the shaky handwriting when the Man from the Midlands, bringing a refreshing breath of some purer atmosphere, entered the ill-ventilated room.

He wore a brand new red waistcoat with brass

buttons, and his apology for lateness hinted at a gay night: a suggestion belied directly by the freshness of his complexion, and the air of wholesome physical well-being he exhaled. Mr. Rock held the by no means infrequent delusion that in spending an evening at a metropolitan music hall he was draining the cup of pleasure to its dregs.

Sitting down, he cast a half-pitying, half-affectionate glance at the letter by his plate.

"It's from my aunt. And it's sure to be full of good advice, it is. Brought me up, the old lady did, and she can't get over the notion that I'm a kiddy still. I believe she'd like to give me a Saturday's penny as she used, and she is always lecturing me about the evils of smoking!

"You see, Miss Grant," he added, dropping his voice, "my uncle was a bit of a miser, he was. Working hard and hoarding, that's how he spent his life. And aunt, she toiled away working and saving to please him, not knowing how warm he was. Now that he's dead an' she's got the money, she'd so got into the way of pinching and scraping that I'm blessed if she can bring herself to spend anything. And her that might be so comfortable too. . . . Why"—his voice took the solemn inflection of one who announces an impressive fact—"if you'll believe me, that woman could spend four hundred and fifty per an. without touching a penny of her capital!

"But it's made a changed being of her," he added sadly. "When she had to look at both sides of a sixpence, many's the poor creature she helped

with the little she had in her power ; but now that she has plenty you would think it hurts her to part with a penny. But she's a good sort, too. When I come up to town for a little flicker you would think I was an innocent boy, the instructions she gives me about keeping out of harm and avoiding loose companions. Her that's never been fifty miles from Diddleswick in her life !”

He laughed a little as he made the whimsical protest, but Frances liked him for the kindly tremor in his voice.

She passed the morning finishing a letter for the West Indian mail. It had been hard to compose, for in it she made known to Mason Trent her determination to relinquish the greater portion of her small fortune. And, though Frances resolutely sought to persuade herself that Trent must applaud her disinterested intention, there were haunted moments when she could not altogether banish the recollection of how Tom Chauncery had hinted at, and Cynthia had openly avowed, the probability of his disapproval.

The letter posted, Frances with lightened heart strolled westwards in pursuit of that purely feminine pleasure—a good look at the shop windows. Evidently she was not the only boarder who had left Brandreth House bent on a like diversion, for on passing a smart hat-shop near Oxford Circus she was amused to see Mr. Rock, an expression of blank perplexity on his honest face, gazing intently at the rainbow-hued array of frippery seen through the expanse of plate-glass. Half an hour later in Regent Street she again came upon him standing

in the same attitude of perturbed indecision in front of another millinery emporium.

Turning, with something akin to a sigh of despair, from a bewildered scrutiny of the head-gear displayed in the window, Mr. Rock encountered the amused glance of Frances.

"Well, Mr. Rock, you ought to be an adept in millinery styles. Are you thinking of buying a bonnet?"

She had spoken jestingly, but Mr. Rock answered the question seriously.

"Yes, I am, Miss Grant. But there don't seem to be any. I'm looking for a sensible bonnet with strings to it. I've looked in all the hat-shops, and there's nothing there but fly-away things like these."

A light flashed upon Frances.

"Oh—you want to buy a bonnet for your aunt?"

"Yes. I thought I'd take her home one as a present. You see, it's like this"—he lowered his voice—"I can't get her to spend any money on herself. Last autumn I had a heap of trouble getting her to promise to order a new bonnet. And whenever I saw it I thought there was something familiar about it. And if you'll believe me, what do you think that woman had done but gone and had a new flower stuck in the old bonnet! But she didn't take me in, I can tell you!"

"There are so few nice old ladies nowadays. Everybody is so anxious to be young and wear hats and toques and motor caps, that I suppose the milliners don't think it worth while putting real comfortable matronly bonnets in their windows.

But they are certain to have plenty inside. If you went in and asked, they would be glad to show them to you."

Mr. Rock made a movement in the direction of the shop door, then paused irresolutely.

"Would you like me to go in with you?" Frances volunteered the suggestion in reply to the unspoken entreaty that halted on his lips.

"Oh, if you only would!" he assented gratefully. And two minutes later they were sitting on little gilt chairs placed on a mossy green carpet requesting a condescending female, clad in a sweeping robe of black merveilleuse, to show them examples of the newest styles in bonnets suitable for an elderly lady.

As Mr. Rock's taste inclined to the ornate, and he grudged no expense, it was with difficulty that, without any appearance of undue coercion, Frances succeeded in attracting his attention from certain creations glittering in tinsel and resplendent with flower and feather, to a dainty bonnet whose adornment lay in a little real lace, a touch of soft velvet and a sable tail. His objections to the plainness of this structure were overcome by the addition of a cluster of pale wisteria.

"She likes a bit of style, does the old lady; but that doesn't look her sort," he remarked, eyeing the bonnet dubiously, as it perched on the top of the saleswoman's elaborate erection of honey-hued puffs and pleats. But when Frances, removing her fur toque, placed the bonnet on her own pretty head, and having tied the broad velvet strings in a matronly bow under her chin, turned and smiled at him, he capitulated instantly, and paid the price demanded

with only one stipulation, which was the somewhat unusual one that both the price ticket on the article and the receipt for the money he paid were to be made out for the smallest possible fraction of the sum actually disbursed as would appear feasible.

"But no one would credit that this bonnet cost only a guinea," the saleswoman made indignant protest, her personal dignity resenting even the mendacious implication that she retailed cheap goods.

"Never you mind, Miss. That's my look-out," retorted Mr. Rock, revealing unexpected firmness. "You leave that to me."

"You see, as I was telling you, Miss Grant, the old soul is so cranky now, that if she thinks I've got a bargain of the thing she'll have ever so much more pleasure in wearing it, than if she knew I had paid the honest price," he explained, when the saleswoman had reluctantly, and with many protestations against the unbusinesslike character of the proceeding, agreed to a compromise which entailed the making out of two receipts. Armed with the one which was for the modest sum of a guinea, Mr. Rock was prepared to combat his aunt's dread of extortion. The other, which represented the larger portion of the sum paid, he intended promptly to destroy.

And Frances, witnessing the trouble he had taken with the sole object of humouring the whims of his old relative, found herself fast losing sight of his commonplace features, his unpolished manner, his *outré* taste in dress, and gaining a soul-warming glimpse of the kindly unselfish\* spirit owned by the Man from the Midlands.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCORDANT NOTES

**T**HE events of the morning had attuned the soul of Frances to something of its former blitheness.

Knowledge that the letter conveying to Mason Trent the news of the intended voluntary surrender of her property was now beyond recall, had in a measure lifted the oppression of an unfulfilled duty from her mind. The amusing experience of abetting Mr. Rock's millinery purchase had further tended to restore her buoyancy of spirit. It was in an unusually happy mood that Frances sat down to luncheon at her table in the almost deserted dining-room.

There a couple of letters awaited her. Neither had come by post. One had the mean exterior of a bill, the other, encased in a large square envelope which bore writing to correspond and flaunted an obtrusive crest, she saw at a glance was from Cynthia. The fact that it had been delivered by hand afforded direct evidence of Mrs. Chauncery's return to London.

With a foreboding that her cousin's note contained merely a repetition of Cynthia's already expressed opinions regarding her culpable folly, Frances opened the other first. From the fact that this

communication also bore no stamp, she had concluded that it contained her week's bill, and her conjecture proved to be correct.

She had slit open the envelope carelessly, confident that the contents held no surprise for her, and that according to her agreement the sum claimed as due for board and lodging would be thirty-five shillings with probably an added trifle for fires. To her amazement the amount charged was considerably over two pounds.

For a space Frances stared at the paper bewildered by having her painstaking calculations thus rudely proved inaccurate. Then with sinking heart she carefully read over the enumerated items.

The charge for board-residence was correct; a further sum of two shillings and twopence for bedroom fires seemed moderate. The surprise lay in the entry: "To seven days' funcheons—7s."

Now and now only did it flash upon Frances that in the advertised list of inclusive meals there had been no mention of luncheon. Her daily wonder that the other boarders so rarely partook of the meal, that on five days out of the seven she had been the only person served at that hour, found sudden solution. The fact that the price of a shilling was set on each lunch explained why most of her fellow-guests preferred to take their mid-day meal wherever it chanced to be convenient. It explained too why the Canveys usually ascended to their chamber about one o'clock, descending with sharpened appetites at four for tea.

The charge for fires was strictly just, and by no means exorbitant. There had been gloomy, soul-



harrowed days when, feeling the enforced society of uncongenial people arouse in her usually tranquil mind an unendurable feeling of irritation, Frances had recklessly ordered a bedroom fire, and sat by it, pondering.

Of one thing only was she certain—continued existence at Brandreth House on these terms would absorb too large a proportion of her income. Where could she seek a cheaper haven?

Abandoning the subject in despair of finding an answer, Frances turned her attention to Cynthia's letter. Her communications seemed fated to contain the unexpected, for opening Mrs. Chauncery's note in the anticipation of finding a scathing criticism of her misdeeds, Frances was agreeably surprised to discover that it conveyed an invitation to dinner couched in Mrs. Chauncery's most persuasive terms. Would dear Fan dine with them quite informally that evening at eight? They were longing to see her. It would be almost a family party,—certainly there would not be more than one other guest. But would Fan dress her hair high, and put on that new gown that Fridoline had made her?

In a postscript Mrs. Chauncery added that she would have sent the motor to fetch her, but that as it was only a shilling cab fare from Bloomsbury it seemed scarcely worth while, and Fan must remember not to spoil the cab-driver by giving him more than his legal charge.

Having signed to Alphonse to remove the soup that in her abstraction she had permitted to get cold, Frances puzzled over her cousin's unheralded change of attitude and the unexpected sum total

of her bill, the while she mechanically ate the mutton and flabby salad, and stewed fruit and *blancmange* that coldly furnished forth the luncheon table. But for all realization she had of the nature of the viands, Frances might have been eating sawdust.

Judging her cousins from the standpoint of her own generous nature, she concluded that Cynthia had come to feel in sympathy with her intended monetary sacrifice, and wished an opportunity to tell her so. And conscious that she must either leave her present place of abode or rigorously curtail her expenditure, Frances, shrinking from the ordeal of again venturing to make a home amongst strangers, resolved in future to make a scratch meal, eaten outside, take the place of a regular luncheon, and to deny herself even the occasional satisfaction of a bedroom fire.

Frances was young, and as she stood before the mirror in her chilly bedroom obediently dressing her sunny brown hair high, and adjusting the diaphanous draperies of her black gown, she felt oddly elated at the near prospect of re-entering her own sphere even for a few hours. Although only one week had passed, and no irrevocable step had yet been taken, already there seemed a great gulf fixed between herself and her old life—that invisible but clearly defined gulf that separates a Bloomsbury boarding-house from a Mayfair mansion.

Still, for the evening Frances resolved to put aside all thoughts of a humiliating tendency and enjoy her outing to the full. Cynthia promised to be gracious—none could be a better hostess when it

suit her purpose—and Tom Chauncery was always kind.

Her dress too was lovely and becoming. She had ordered it while still under the impression that a handsome evening-dress was a binding necessity of her position.

When she started in the four-wheeler, Frances, determined to profit by her cousin's advice to overcome her tendency to extravagance, had provided herself with the shilling that represented the legal fare ; but when she alighted from the ram-shackle vehicle and saw the old driver shrunken in the heap of nondescript garments by which he sought to hold at bay the eager January wind, her resolution failed her, and fumbling in her purse-bag she gave him a florin. Then, half-gratified by the warmth of his hoarse " Thank ye, Miss," and half-ashamed of her infirmity of purpose, she entered the house, firm in the intention of atoning for her folly by fining herself something of the exact monetary value of the squandered shilling.

Instructions had evidently been given that on arrival Frances was to be taken up to her hostess's room. For Frances had no sooner entered the hall than Mrs. Chauncery's maid appeared to escort her to the chamber where Cynthia, standing before a long mirror, was surveying her tall figure with unquestioned approbation.

Laying down the hand-glass she held, Cynthia, turning, received her cousin with effusive words and critical eye.

" You've put on that dress. And done your hair the way I like ? Yes, that's right.—You

can go after you fasten that lace-pin at the back, Wood.—I always have a brooch put as a fastening at the back of an evening bodice. A little touch of that sort proves so conclusively that one has not dressed one's self, you know."

"Well, Fan," she added gaily, as the door closed behind the departing Wood: "I have a great surprise for you. Who do you think is coming here to-night? I told you we would have one other guest, didn't I? There—you'll never guess, so I'll put you out of suspense. It is Mason Trent! I did not know he had left St. Hertha until he walked in here to-day. He had asked politely for me—Mason is always polite—but I knew he was looking for you."

"Mason Trent. . . . But I thought he could not possibly get here before March."

Frances's reason was slower to accept the joyful possibility of Trent's proximity than was her heart, for though her tone was incredulous her cheeks were already aglow.

"Yes, he didn't expect to get away till the February mail. And when he learned that he was free to come and could just catch the steamer, of course there was no time to write. He arrived at Plymouth late last night. When he got to town this morning he called at Ominey's to see you. They gave him Tom's office address, and he came here instead, thinking naturally that you would be with me. I didn't tell him you weren't staying here, for I wouldn't for worlds that he guessed you were living at that appalling place. You know how fastidious he is. It would be simply fatal. And

you must just bundle up your things and come here to-morrow morning, for of course you won't dream of carrying out your mad scheme now that he has come. I can't be too thankful Mason saw me first. I consider his coming providential." Mrs. Chauncery had a way of considering every occurrence that furthered her own schemes as a special dispensation of Providence. "That's what I said to Tom. I said: 'Mason Trent's return is simply providential. *Now* we won't hear any more of Fanny's wild notions.'"

Frances did not reply. She was thinking deeply. The unexpected arrival of the one man whom she regarded as a factor in her future had the effect of disorganizing her calculations.

"Mason will think I am right," she declared, uttering her hope rather than her conviction. "He is unselfishness itself."

Cynthia cast a sidelong glance at her cousin and, compressing her thin lips, discreetly kept silence. Her inborn quality of worldly wisdom had taught her that in real life, especially when dealing with money questions, theories, however gracefully draped, showed but meanly beside naked facts. If she understood men and motives as thoroughly as she believed she did, Mrs. Chauncery had no hesitation in believing that Mason Trent would treat Frances's suicidal scheme with the contumely it deserved. As it was, she tactfully said nothing more than: "Let us go into the drawing-room. Our guest may have already arrived. Dinner isn't till the half-hour. I told you to come earlier, so that we might get time for a chat."

But even the near prospect of seeing Frances, from whom since October thousands of miles of ocean had separated him, would not induce one so punctilious in matters of etiquette as Mason Trent to commit the *gaucherie* of arriving ten minutes too early for dinner. It was not until the dainty skeleton-clock on the mantelpiece was in the act of chiming the half-hour that Frances's eagerly listening ears heard his foot on the stair.

As he entered, Frances, her whole being astir with joy at the meeting, a sweet tumult of emotion for the moment obscuring her recollection of social observance, left her chair and took a step towards him, with face rose-flushed and outstretched hands.

A less punctilious man might, under the circumstances, have deemed it excusable to waive the convention that bade him ignore the presence of any other until he had first greeted his hostess. Not so Trent. Taking Cynthia's hand, he pressed it with exactly the correct degree of warmth, and made the stereotyped remark before turning to Frances. The delay was but momentary, yet somehow it acted as a cold douche upon the impulsive Frances, who found it emotionally chilling to have the intimation that dinner was served coincide with her lover's first greeting.

By measure of years Mason Trent was under thirty. Whether one regarded him as a young old man, or an old young man, was a matter of personal poise. His qualities engendered respect rather than affection. He had passed through the ordeal of public school life in exemplary fashion, and left having earned the esteem of every master,

and failed to gain the affection of a single boy. In appearance he was tall and admirably groomed, his features were well cut, his expression advantageously non-committal.

Viewed as an entity, Trent presented an admirably tutored mind encased in a judiciously dieted and exercised frame. His manner was refined and dignified, his speech deliberate, his style of dress unobtrusive. Any detail either of person or of attire so pronounced as to attract remark Trent would have considered vulgar. His morals, like his manners, were carefully tabulated. He might confidently be relied upon to say and do the correct thing on all occasions; might be guaranteed to avoid perpetrating any action that would afford the world an opportunity of speaking his name with opprobrium, or even with dubiety.

To sum up, Mason Trent was a man whose every transaction was governed by strict rectitude, but who felt scant lenience towards the weaknesses of others, one who liquidated his debts the moment they became due, but who always demanded the discount to which he knew he was entitled.

During the period that Trent had filled the post of private secretary to Sir Alan Grant at St. Hertha it is unnecessary to state that he had performed his duties to perfection, being always in time when Sir Alan—who had no sense of punctuality—was late, cool when Sir Alan was heated, systematic and orderly when Sir Alan was spasmodic and unmethodical.

Wherein had lain his attraction for Frances was hard to explain, save by the threadbare theory

of opposites. She and her uncle had been ruled only by gracious impulse. Trent was subject solely to careful calculation. While the Grants were prey to their easily aroused sympathies, Trent never permitted himself to believe a case worthy until he had exhaustively investigated its claim to his charity.

Estimating Trent's character with the glorifying influence of love added to her customary generosity, Frances had endowed him with every notable gift. In her eyes he was the embodiment of chivalry, the epitome of magnanimity. With her unexpected appearance the nebulous doubts that had haunted her vanished. As, taking Tom Chauncery's arm, she went downstairs to dinner, her heart beat high in the belief that Mason Trent's arrival had brought her sadly buffeted forces a valiant champion.



## CHAPTER IX

### THE FORBIDDEN TOPIC

AS he sat down to dinner at the Chauncerys' perfectly appointed table, Trent was as nearly in a state of felicity as so admirably restrained a being could be.

The months since Sir Alan Grant's death had been annoying, his position at St. Hertha insecure. The new Governor's curt dictatorial manner, so speedily succeeding his predecessor's geniality, had lowered Trent's sense of self-importance. The voyage home had been decidedly unpleasant. The sea was rough, and Trent, who was a bad sailor and hated to be seen in an undignified position, had been unable to secure a cabin to himself.

Now, for the first moment since Frances had quitted St. Hertha, he found the company and surroundings entirely to his mind. Though the cold without was piercing, the temperature of the dining-room was exactly right. The softly shaded light concentrated itself upon the orchids and smilax that formed the sole table decoration, leaving the faces of the diners in becoming shadow. Mrs. Chauncery gave special attention to the lighting of her rooms. In her opinion people who invited guests to their houses and condemned them to sit in an untempered glare of electricity ought to be rigorously ostracized.

"Now with my arrangement," she was wont to declare, "everybody looks nice—even Tom!"

On Trent's left hand was Mrs. Chauncery, for whose social gifts he had a sincere admiration. On his right was Tom Chauncery, for whom, as the school chum and manhood's friend of his half-brother Sir Stephen Russell, Trent had an inherent respect. Opposite sat Frances Grant, lovely gracious Frances, her whole being now tremulous with the delight of their unexpected meeting; Frances, whose cheeks flushed a softer rose each time her blue eyes met his across the flowers that separated them.

Before him lay the pleasant prospect of a holiday that he knew to be well deserved, its only labour the sweet task of making love to one who, he felt already assured, loved him.

Glancing at the down-drooping lashes that covered the sparkle of her luminous eyes, Trent applauded the happy wisdom that, while avoiding the *gaucherie* of obtruding amorous feelings into a house of mourning, had yet made a loverlike attitude now easy to assume. It needed but a few words on his part, he knew, to put matters between himself and Frances upon a definite footing. Their engagement might shortly be announced, and after a suitable interval the wedding might follow. With his own private income and that of Frances they would be moderately independent, and her experience as hostess to her uncle would be of incalculable value to him in the diplomatic post he had confident expectation of ultimately securing.

The dinner—admirably cooked and served—was progressing. Frances was too ecstatic to know

what was offered her. Trent, eating with the deliberation that characterized all his actions, was enjoying his meal, though one of his stock sentiments was to the effect that he regarded eating merely as a necessary physical exercise. Cynthia as usual led the conversation, and though there was a tacit understanding that nothing was to be said at dinner regarding Frances's changed circumstances, it was oddly embarrassing to find that, steer it away as skilfully as they might, the talk seemed persistently to drift dangerously near the forbidden topic.

Trent was full of interested inquiry respecting their prospective movements. Having travelled direct from the tropical warmth of the West Indies into the depths of a London winter, he found the chill clammy atmosphere peculiarly trying, and confessed that he had been hopeful of securing their permission to join the expedition to Biarritz concerning which Frances's last letter had informed him.

"When do you start for Biarritz? I was half afraid I might find you already gone. Had that been the case I would not have waited a day longer than was absolutely necessary before following you."

Mrs. Chauncery smiled enigmatically.

"When do we start? I'm afraid that depends entirely upon Fanny. Do you hear, Fan? Mason asks when we leave for Biarritz. Shall we say next Thursday?"

It is one thing to a sensitive emotional nature to whisper a confidence into sympathetic ears; it is quite another to proclaim it aloud at table, while blank-faced, alert-eared servants punctuate the recital with interjected dishes. Frances, hot and

cold by turns, sat dumb under her cousin's malicious smile, till Tom Chauncery came to her rescue.

"You must blame me for the delay, Trent. It has been some business connected with the winding-up of Sir Alan's estate that has postponed the making of arrangements for the trip. But I think everything will soon be settled now, and Fanny will be free to go and enjoy herself," he said, looking kindly at Frances, whose eyes were downcast.

"It will be so much nicer travelling with a man to take care of us." Cynthia, who was determined to drag the conversation back to a more impersonal standpoint, smiled her sweetest at her male guest. "When we are at Biarritz we won't hurry home. Tom will join us at Easter—that is, if he doesn't pretend he can't leave town, and sneak down to Bournemouth to spend the vacation with Nannie! Now about the Biarritz hotels."

Mrs. Chauncery was not one of the hap-hazard travellers who leave the making of terms till they are at the mercy of a foreign hotel-manager. She had already provided herself with the tariffs of the leading Biarritz hostelries, and could speak with knowledge of their various charges. So for a time the talk floundered on in the safe shallows of hotel prices.

The servants had gone at last. Frances, forcing herself to speak the words that lingered irresolute on her reluctant lips, taking advantage of the first momentary pause in the conversation, began her explanation desperately, disjointedly.

"There is something I ought to tell you. It is unfair to keep you in ignorance—Uncle Alan's

affairs have not been left exactly as he expected they should—I am really quite poor now. I'm afraid I can't afford to go to Biarritz——”

“Nonsense, Fanny! Mason, don't believe her. Tom, do tell Mason the real state of things,” Cynthia hastily interposed, in an attempt to stem her cousin's foolish confidence.

“Well, you see, on looking into matters, I found that certain of Sir Alan's investments had depreciated considerably in value. And a large proportion of his capital had been sunk in a loan to the owner of a sugar plantation——”

Trent nodded his sleek head sagely.

“Slither. Yes, I know. . . . I warned Sir Alan, but it was too late. I gathered recently that the state of Slither's affairs was hopeless even before he induced Sir Alan to bolster him up.”

“Then Sir Alan had made a large number of bequests——”

“Always a mistake,” murmured Trent.

“The result is that, settling up, we find that there is not enough capital left to pay the legacies in full.

“Ah, yes. . . . I feared a complication of the kind,” Trent made polite murmur. “But in spite of the deficiency there still remains a—considerable sum?”

That alertness evinced by even the most composed of mortals when the question of money in which they have even a remote interest is under discussion, lent animation to Trent's tone.

“Yes—there is still a considerable sum remaining,” Chauncery acknowledged gravely.

During Tom's explanation Frances had kept intent eyes upon Trent's face without gathering any in-

formation from his well-schooled expression. Fearing lest he might still be under the belief that her portion was secure, she felt impelled to speak—would have spoken had not the vigilant Cynthia, who was resolved that so long as she had power to prevent it Frances would not be permitted to make a fool of herself, interposed with an untimely suggestion of leaving the men to their cigars. Rising gracefully, with no appearance of haste, she left the dining-room preceded perforce by Frances, who experienced an ignominious sensation of having been “shooed” out of the room like some recalcitrant infant.

“My dear child! How can you be so appallingly idiotic? If I hadn’t forcibly brought you away you would have blurted it all out. You know you would!”

“Yes. I know I would.”

“Even after what I said! Can you not read a man like Mason Trent better than that? Why, even though you had only confessed to having *thought* of throwing away the money, he would never again have trusted your discretion! Do have a glimmering of sense and think of your own future. Remember Mason Trent is a man who is certain to succeed in diplomacy. His expression is so delightfully impassive, and he always gives one the impression of knowing ever so much more than he really does. Apart from that, he is certain to inherit the family estate. Sir Stephen will never marry. His only interest is in fighting, and I must say he has a genius for that. He never even thinks of women. Tom says he believes Stephen really does not know they exist! So ultimately Mason will get

everything, and Ruffington Chase is quite a nice little place."

"I shall tell him to-night if I get an opportunity," was Frances's only reply.

Cynthia shrugged her white shoulders contemptuously.

"Well, if you must, you must. Only don't come whimpering to me when you find that Mason Trent has a wholesome dislike to throwing away money."

Crossing the room with the resigned air of one finally discarding an unprofitable subject, Mrs. Chauncery seated herself at her writing-table and began to slit open the letters that had come by the last post. But at the same time she determined not to allow her foolish cousin the opportunity she craved, a sign that she had not yet abandoned the controversy as hopeless.

Unfortunately for Mrs. Chauncery's resolve, an inscrutable Providence had bestowed upon her a spouse whom even seventeen years of marital community had not endowed with subtlety of conception sufficient for the understanding and furthering of his wife's schemes. Tom Chauncery it was who, acting in all innocence, and moved by the best of motives, frustrated Cynthia's plot. For no sooner had he and Trent rejoined the ladies than Chauncery, fired with the laudable intention of leaving the younger people to themselves, began to signal to his wife, who sedulously ignored him. Finding Cynthia as he believed obtuse, Chauncery left the drawing-room. A moment later the butler entered to say that someone was waiting in the library to see her.

"That's Tom—the idiot!" thought Mrs. Chaun-

cery, as she disdainfully rustled out. "If he must do such a blatant thing, why in the name of everything could he not do it in a less appallingly vulgar way?" Everything in her husband's actions that she did not approve of, Cynthia was wont to designate as "vulgar."

Meantime Trent was all unconsciously making Frances's task an even harder one than she had anticipated. Alone with this glowing girl who palpitated at his touch, Trent's slow pulses quickened with the knowledge that it was his proximity that brought the swift blood to her cheek, the quiver to her voice. For once Trent was moved out of his tutored restraint into a semblance of ardour. And, carried away by the emotion of the moment, Frances was content to procrastinate, to delay the evil moment, while she feasted hungrily upon the scraps of affection he offered.

Trent was not an effusive lover, but Frances was not exacting. With the easily satisfied fervour of an absolutely innocent woman who loves an idea rather than a flesh-and-blood being, she received his restrained caress gratefully oblivious for the time of the obstacle that threatened to arise between them, perhaps because she refused to allow herself to believe in the probability of it proving an obstacle.

A chance remark of Trent's regarding the pleasure in store recalled her.

"But I am not going to Biarritz. I was quite in earnest at dinner. I really can't afford to go," she blurted out.

Trent laughed—his thin incisive laugh that had so little of real humour in it.



"But honestly, I am not jesting. I must tell you. You know—Tom told you a lot of uncle's money has been lost. There is not enough to pay everybody. So I have decided to take less so that the poor old people—who need their legacies so much, especially now that Uncle Alan is dead and can't help them any more—will get their money in full. And that will leave me only a very little. One can't take trips to so smart a place as Biarritz on a hundred and fifty pounds a year—can one?"

She had tried to speak lightly, but the apprehension born of his silence crept into her voice, rendering her attempted assurance a poor mockery. Trent's arm had been around her when she spoke, but though he did not withdraw it, though there had been no change of attitude, she felt in some inexplicable way as though they had somehow drawn apart. With a rush, all Cynthia's premonitions returned to her.

"You have not told any one of this idea—have you?"

"Tom knows, and Cynthia. No one else—yet."

"Do they approve?" Trent asked quietly.

"I'm afraid they don't," Frances confessed.

"You say the Chauncerys disapprove? Then the question arises whether it is wise to reject the unbiassed advice of those who have your interests at heart. But I am afraid I don't quite understand your point of view. Why should you feel it incumbent upon you to impoverish yourself?"

The arguments that, adjudged by the tribunal of her secret heart, had appeared so conclusive, if dragged out before the clear light of Trent's reason would,

she felt, appear merely emotional—almost hysterical. A disconcerting wonder whether, after all, her idea of duty might not be an exaggerated one, passed like a shadow over her mind. Tom Chauncery's opinion she knew was the only one possible for a man of business who had the interests of his client at heart. Cynthia's antagonism to her cousin's proposed course of action was rooted, as Frances realized, in Cynthia's dislike to seeing money go out of the family, and to her natural repugnance to being obliged to own relationship with a cousin in reduced circumstances. But Trent, whose opinions she set upon an unassailable pinnacle of their own—Trent, whose rectitude was irreproachable: surely *he* would guide her aright.

"Well! Have you laughed Fanny out of her mad notions?" Mrs. Chauncery, with her accustomed rustle of raiment and jingle of jewellery had broken in upon their silence. Cynthia's life was set to an accompaniment of rustle and jingle. "Isn't the very idea ludicrous? Can you imagine Fan subsisting on twopence a week? Isn't the notion too appalling for words?"

Under the invited scrutiny Frances sat blushing and distressed. Tears that she resolutely kept from falling pricked her eyelids.

Trent's reply to his hostess's questions was admirably non-committal.

"Miss Grant live upon twopence a week? Well—hardly!" was all that he said. But from the calm decision of the tone Mrs. Chauncery was highly gratified to conclude upon no evidence whatever that they had heard the last of Fanny's nonsense.

During the game of bridge that followed, Frances was glad that she was Tom's partner. Somehow she felt he would be more lenient than Mason towards the blunders into which her mental agitation betrayed her.

"Shall you be at home to-morrow if I call about four o'clock?" Trent asked as he took her hand in farewell.

Frances was trembling on the brink of an explanation that involved Brandreth House, when Cynthia hastened to the rescue.

"Yes, Fan will be here. I'm sorry I shan't be at home. I promised to introduce Ellaline Bister to a decent dressmaker—Ellaline has tons of money, you know, and not an atom of taste in dress, so I'll take her to Fridoline. But Fanny will be here, and you must promise to wait till I return."

"Many thanks. Till to-morrow, then, at four," Trent repeated quietly, and Frances knew that the hardest part of her struggle was timed to begin next day at four o'clock precisely.

## CHAPTER X

### RENUNCIATION

MRS. CHAUNCERY'S drawing-room, the scene of Frances Grant's prospective ordeal, was a large L-shaped room facing the north. On this January day when Frances, pale and hot-eyed from a sleepless night, entered it, she for once was glad that the three tall windows looking on to narrow Half-Down Street admitted so little light.

The room itself, despite its northern exposure, was as cheerfully gay as a wood fire, plenty of seductive easy-chairs, cushion-piled couches and abundant knick-knacks and bric-à-bric could make it.

In matters of house decoration Cynthia moved with the mode of the moment. There had been a time when, severe simplicity being the rage, the drawing-room had presented the chill ascetic aspect of whitewashed walls, and straight-backed uncompromising white furniture. A time when the floral decoration was restricted to tall mop-headed orange trees in green tubs, and Cynthia herself, eschewing fashionable raiment, had been clad in sad-hued clinging garments. That too was the period of Nannie Chauncery's banishment to school; for Nannie, taking after her father's side of the house, was not a picturesque child. But while a child can easily be deported, the master of a household is by

unalienable right a fixture, and it was one of Cynthia's secret grievances that her husband, who was stoutish and essentially ordinary of appearance, tended to spoil the picture. Irreverent Sir Alan Grant, who chanced to come home on a visit during Cynthia's decorative pose, in writing to Frances, who was then at school in Switzerland, described Tom Chauncery as "a round man in a square home!"

That phase had lasted but a brief space. The room speedily lapsed into a less formal condition, This afternoon it was alluringly snug and cosy. Frances, who had arrived early, sat alone in the half-light by the wide green-tiled hearth. Though the room was warm, she shivered nervously. When she tried to concentrate her thoughts upon the coming interview, to formulate what she could say that would best touch Trent's sympathies, she found it impossible to keep her ideas from straying. When she should have been marshalling her scattered arguments into line, she found herself idly wondering how long her own photograph would be permitted to occupy the large silver-gilt frame in which her cousin had enshrined it. It would hardly suit Cynthia to have the likeness of a poor relation in so prominent a position.

Unable to sit still, Frances moved restlessly about the room, carefully examining the ornaments without seeing them, and turning over the pages of the few books without gaining the slightest idea of their contents.

Cynthia subscribed regularly to a library, because not to have done so would have augured herself uninterested in literature; but she rarely opened a

book. It was Tom Chauncery who made out the lists and did the reading. As his life was passed in hereditary toil in the cramped surroundings of a city office, his curbed natural love of adventure found vicarious outlet in the perusal of deeds of dering-do, wherein he found all the colour and action that a respectably commonplace existence in a grey city had denied him. Even in the midst of her own perturbation Frances smiled to note that his most recent choice had been a boy's book of rousing adventure, and that his bookmark rested opposite an illustration that revealed the young heroes discovering a skeleton half buried in the sand of the desert island.

Frances was listlessly turning over the pages, half-unconsciously extracting a purely feminine species of enjoyment from the odour of a good cigar that they exhaled, when the door opened and Trent was announced.

Even at that first moment Frances's highly-strung mind, keenly alert for impressions, imagined a change in his mental attitude towards herself. His manner was courteous, gracious, even cordial, but it was also guarded, as though he held his feelings in check so that at any moment it would be easy either to advance by the sunny path that leads to the altar, or to retire by the inclement way that ends in celibacy.

With a swift glance to right and left as though to assure himself that they were really alone, Trent took Frances's hand and held it warmly, lingeringly—he was an adept at the little affectionate touches that seem to express so much, and yet commit one to

nothing—but he did not kiss her. And Frances knew instinctively that his future endearments would be meted out in just proportion as reward of her pliability to his expressed wishes.

“But you are going out?”

He had noticed that she wore her hat and gloves, and that her furs lay on the chair by the fire where she had thrown them off.

“Oh no! I have just come in. I don't think you know, but—I am not living here just now.”

“Not living here? But I thought—at least, Mrs. Chauncery gave me to understand——”

“Yes, it is my fault. I should have told you.”—Frances was too loyal to blame Cynthia.—“When I found that in future my income would be small I saw that a West End hotel was beyond my means. So I went further east. At present I am staying at a boarding-house in Bloomsbury.”

“At a boarding-house in Bloomsbury!” echoed Trent, for once roused out of his carefully assumed imperturbability.

“Yes. In Ratigan Square. It is really quite a—a—convenient locality. And one gets marvellous value for the money one pays.”

“But, tell me—is this quite necessary?”

“It is necessary for my peace of mind, Mason.”

“But not for mine. Frances, I saw Chauncery this morning. He assured me that the sacrifice is in no way incumbent upon you. Will you not, for my sake—for both our sakes, dear—reconsider the matter?”

Half-unconsciously they had moved into the radius of the fire-light. As she spoke, Trent, coming a

step nearer, put out a hand and caressingly touched her shoulder.

Frances, trembling in a tumult of conflicting emotions, steeled herself against the enervating persuasion of the senses.

"Oh, Mason! I only wish I could. But even to please you I cannot—I really cannot. I can only do what I feel to be right, and"—her voice sank to a whisper—"my friends must try to love me for myself alone."

She had tried to speak lightly, making a brave effort to conceal her painful anxiety; but as she spoke the last words all her strength of will failed to disguise the tremulous expectancy in her voice.

Only one reply was possible to a genuine lover. Trent did not make it.

In the significant silence that followed her rash speech a strangling sob caught Frances's throat, for the moment deafening her. When she again heard, Trent was talking in his slow impassive voice, going over the threadbare arguments.

Putting the matter judicially, apart from all personal feeling, he questioned whether she had the moral right to render invalid Sir Alan's carefully arranged provision for her future by devoting to others the money designed for her own use. In his opinion—an opinion delivered with due weight and gravity—any relinquishment of her just right, however voluntary it might be, would be an insult to the wisdom of the dead. It was charitable, undeniably generous, no doubt, even heroic, to be willing to sacrifice her own interests. Still——

Quiet deliberation invariably marked Trent's



speech. He spoke in a carefully modulated voice, without haste, as though every word he uttered was of value. Tom Chauncery once said that had he not already known, he could have guessed from Trent's slow mode of talking that he had been brought up alone ; because any member of a big family soon learns that he has to speak quickly, or lose the chance of a hearing.

Platitude succeeded platitude. The words Frances's heart longed for, words that would assure her that it was herself he cared for, that even penniless she was still herself—that the lack of a few paltry thousands mattered nothing, that they were both young, and that life together under any conditions would be heaven—failed to find utterance.

Trent's calm voice reviewed the subject clearly, decisively, filling her with an unanswerable conviction that he regarded her purpose merely as the illogical intent of a hysterical woman.

Had Trent revealed any sign of sympathetic feeling ; had he but taken Frances in his arms and vowed—sincerely or not—that it was she he loved, not her gold ; that affluent or needy she would ever be the woman he loved, Frances might—nay, being of a yielding disposition, most probably *would*—have veered round to his way of thinking, and have acted on his advice. Cajolery might have won what coercion could not.

But when he refused to consider aught but the retraction of her given word, a latent strain of obstinacy, the Scots "dourness" that had enabled her far-off Covenanting forefathers to adhere to the

death to what they believed right, came to her aid, and lent backbone to her resolve.

Had she been able to view the proceeding dispassionately, it might have been curiously interesting to Frances to watch the gradual extension of the impalpable distance that already separated Trent from herself. But lately their concerns had seemed so near akin that their paths in life had all but merged. Now, with only a few spoken words to divide them, they seemed to be moving farther and farther apart. Already Frances felt impotent to bridge the fast-widening gulf that severed them.

Tea had been brought in, unnoticed by Frances. It was Trent who called her attention to the fact. For him their interview closed with her refusal to retract her promise. Even then it was a relief to his politic mind to recollect that as no actual engagement had existed between Frances and himself he was under no necessity of formally renouncing her hand; that he need not even explain that it would be fatal to a man of his aspirations to wed a woman possessing little more income than would keep her in boots and gloves. All that was essential to a dignified ending of the matter would be best met by a masterly inactivity. No promise had been exchanged. There were no formal ties to break. He really had no right to offer objection. Meanwhile nothing would be served by letting tea get cold.

Cynthia, entering the room five minutes later accompanied by a languid indistinctive young lady with pale eyelashes and drab hair tortured into frizzles, whom she introduced as Miss 'Bister, found Frances and Trent sitting one on either side of the tea-table.

A single glance sufficed to enable her astute mind to gauge the existing state of matters. Frances, flushed of cheek, trembling of lip, bewildered of eye, as though scarce yet comprehending what had occurred : Trent pale, and subdued of manner, but resigned, as though he were attending the funeral of a lost friend for whose memory he entertained a sincere regard : the tea-table between them.

“Silly fool!” mentally apostrophized Mrs. Chauncery as she viciously rang the bell for fresh tea. “Why on earth couldn’t Fanny be wise enough to give in on compulsion? She’d have got all the credit of being stupendously generous without its actually costing her a penny!”

## CHAPTER XI

### GREY DAYS

THE minutes had passed slowly—yet all too swiftly for Frances, who already was beginning to realize that once Mason Trent and she had parted they could never again meet on the same intimate terms.

The talk had been desultory, trivial ; then Trent, pleading an engagement, rose to go.

As he took her hand in farewell, Frances raised eagerly questioning eyes ; but his head was turned away as he replied to a remark of Cynthia's, and her wordless query remained unanswered. To Frances's over-acute sensibility even his handshake seemed perfunctory.

"I must go too," Miss Bister said, languidly rising to her feet. "I wish I had thought of offering your friend a lift." She was one of those persons of undecided character who spend half their lives in petty regrets. "It is wet now, and he might have been going my way. But I never think of things till it is too late. No, no more tea, thank you. I shouldn't have eaten muffin. My digestion is so weak, muffin always upsets me."

Though the rain falls equally upon male and upon female, it did not occur to Miss Bister to offer Frances a lift.

"Well, what do you think of the Bister?" asked Cynthia, rustling back from the landing where she had been bidding her guest the effusive God-speed due to unlimited wealth. "Did you every see anyone with such a crude notion of dress? She asked me what shade of hat to wear with that appalling drab gown—why do drab women always elect to clothe themselves in drab tones?—and I suggested pink. Did you see what she had bought!"

"Miss Bister's hat *was* pink—wasn't it?" In her present tumult of emotions Frances found it difficult to concentrate her thoughts upon so trivial a matter as the headgear of a casual acquaintance.

"Pink? Yes, but the *wrong* pink. I positively shuddered when I saw it. But what about you and Mason?"

"There is nothing about me and Mason, Cynthia. That is what I wanted to tell you. We can never be anything to each other now."

"But why be so appallingly——"

A glance at Frances's face sufficed to shew that neither criticism nor reproach could add to her suffering. For once Cynthia's protest was checked on her lips.

"Well, if you're both satisfied, there is nothing more to be said, I suppose," she spoke indifferently, raising a pretty hand to her mouth. "Excuse my yawning. I have been on the rush all day, and we have to dine out, and go on somewhere afterwards. I often tell Tom, I work sixteen hours a day."

Thus politely dismissed, Frances went. Al-

ready she was conscious that her affairs had ceased to interest Cynthia, that any further reference to them would merely have bored her.

It was six o'clock, and the 'buses were crowded. After one or two ineffectual attempts to secure a place, Frances decided to walk back. The rain was falling quite heavily, though she was too engrossed with her own reflections to notice it. Her face turned eastwards, she walked quickly through the lamp-lit streets, almost oblivious of the bustling throng that jostled her, on and on, until suddenly she found herself at Brandreth House, without any clear consciousness of her progress thither.

"Gracious! Miss Grant. How wet you are!" Entering the hall, she had encountered the manageress. "You *have* got a drenching! Why didn't you put up your umbrella?"

"My umbrella? I hadn't one with me. Oh! had I?" Frances was amazed to discover that she carried one in her hand. "I didn't remember. How stupid of me!"

"And your feathers are spoilt, and your beautiful furs soaking wet!"

"It really does not matter," Frances declared. And as she dragged her weary limbs upstairs her heart echoed that nothing mattered now.

With the bitter realization that all was over between Trent and herself, a curious sense of numbness had overtaken her. Whatever befell, even though she lived on for years and years and years, nothing would ever matter again, she told herself drearily. With the dominating fatality of youth she believed that her real life had

ended that afternoon in the Chauncerys' drawing-room.

The window of the bedroom, left open when she went out, was still unclosed. The rain had gathered in a little pool on the oil-cloth underneath the window. The room was damp and chilly.

Dressing mechanically, Frances descended to find the feminine portion of the boarders in the drawing-room patiently awaiting the summons to dinner.

By the feeble illumination of a nearly exhausted electric lamp they seemed pale, listless, miserable.

The welcome sound of the gong galvanized them into voluble activity.

Entering the dining-room in the wake of the little procession, Frances found the Man from the Midlands already awaiting her at table. Tucked into the celluloid ring that encircled her napkin was a cluster of lilies-of-the-valley.

Inhaling their fragrance with pleasure, Frances pinned them into her dress without a thought of whence they came. It was only when she noticed the expression of gratification on Mr. Rock's face, and saw that a pink camelia adorned his button-hole, that she guessed their source.

Had Frances been less engrossed with her own affairs, less impervious to external influences, she might already have become aware of a complete change in Mr. Rock's manner towards herself, might have seen that a protective concern for her well-being had gradually succeeded his primary attitude of dubious reserve. To-night he seemed genuinely sorry to learn that she had been out in

the rain, anxious lest she might be the worse of the wetting.

A bottle of port, provided by Mr. Rock and opened with much flourish of corkscrew by Alphonse, lent a bacchanalian air to their table, and Frances's lack of appetite afforded Mr. Rock an excuse for insisting upon her taking a little.

At any other time she would have declined the wine. Now she was too fatigued and disappointed to resist his entreaty, and yielding, permitted him to fill her glass.

The wine was good. Its reviving influence brought back her fugitive colour, and helped to dispel the dreary benumbed feeling that oppressed her. Seeing Frances looking better, and emboldened by the success of his two minor attempts to please her, Mr. Rock played his trump card.

Taking out his pocket book he paused in the act of extracting something to put a question.

"You aren't engaged for to-morrow night, are you?"

Frances shook her head, uncomprehendingly.

"There, then. Do you see what these are?"

With an air of profound mystery Mr. Rock indicated two pieces of coloured paper that he had laid on the table.

"They are theatre tickets, are they not?"

"Yes. For 'The Little Michus'—Mr. Rock pronounced the last word as though it had three syllables—"for to-morrow night. They say it's a fine piece."

"I believe the music is charming."

"Well, I was thinking—if you have no objection,



that is—we might make a night of it. Dine somewhere first, at the Holborn Restaurant, or one of these big fashionable places, and go right on from there.”

“But I’m afraid I hardly understand. . . .”

The eager complacency of Mr. Rock’s expression and manner wavered.

“You see, you said you had never seen ‘The Little Michus.’ And I thought—you being by yourself, like, and having been so kind about helping to buy the bonnet and all that—it would be a bit of a treat if we were to go together.”

“Oh, it is good of you! Really, extremely good: but I am afraid it is impossible—quite impossible.”

Crestfallen, Mr. Rock pushed the tickets a little nearer.

“They are dress-circle seats—front row, mind you,” he said.

“Oh, yes, I know. It is really not that. But you understand—I am in mourning. I don’t go to any entertainments just now.”

Mr. Rock made no further attempts at persuasion, and the meal ended in silence.

As she left the table Frances, glancing back, saw Mr. Rock with downcast face replacing the vouchers for the rejected treat in his pocket-book. Moved with quick compassion for his disappointment, she turned again.

“Mr. Rock—I hope you understand that I appreciate your kind invitation quite as much as if I had been able to accept it?”

“Oh, *that’s* all right,” was Mr. Rock’s only reply,

but Frances saw that her conciliatory words had already chased the chagrined expression from his honest face.

Mounting to her own room she wrote a note to Tom Chauncery asking that there might be no further delay in settling matters, as she expected shortly to be leaving town, though whither bound she knew not.

That done, more to escape from her own thoughts than from a desire for companionship she drifted into the drawing-room, where she was pounced upon to make a fourth at bridge.

Yielding partly to kill time, and partly because she lacked energy to resist, Frances found herself drawn as partner to the lady from Salisbury. Their opponents were old Mrs. Canvey, and a middle-aged man, plethoric of figure, and curiously quiet of manner, whom the neurotic lady introduced as "My husband, Mr. Joabling."

The Joablings, as Frances speedily discovered, were not the most desirable of bridge partners. Mrs. Joabling, who was a nervous, fidgetty player, had an exasperating custom of seeking to enliven the pause between each deal by exhaustively reviewing the hand she had just held and by proving, to her own satisfaction, that—considering the poverty of her cards—her play had been inevitable, even brilliant; while her apparently immobile spouse exhibited a startling way of becoming lashed to sudden fury when shaky old Mrs. Canvey, who was his partner, hesitated or had the misfortune to lose a trick. In their company Frances, who had been accustomed to playing with gentlefolk, felt

uncomfortably out of her element. When the close of the game left her a loser, she grudged her lost sixpences far beyond their pecuniary value.

In bed she lay awake, half feverishly living over and over again the interview of the afternoon, her soul tortured by vain regrets. If she had only said—anything but what she did say. If Mason had only said—anything but what he did say.

She sought to convince herself that it had been impossible for him to speak before others ; that had Cynthia and Miss Bister not come in he would not have left without a yielding word ; tried to find comfort in the assurance that the fault was *hers*, that had she risen to go in place of lingering, he would have accompanied her ; persuaded herself into believing that Trent had left her merely to write the words he found no opportunity of speaking, and that she would hear from him in the morning.

But the morning brought no letter. Nothing but a dull settled pain at her heart, and an incipient cold in her head. The day was dry, with gleams of wintry sunshine. A brisk walk might have done her good ; but, still hoping against hope, and fearful of missing a visit from Trent, she stayed indoors, spending the morning in hovering restlessly by the drawing-room windows, one of which was adorned by two leafless geraniums and a shrivelled cuba, and the other by two shrivelled cubas and a leafless geranium.

At luncheon time, steadfast to her resolve not to take her midday meal at Brandreth House, Frances went out to the nearest tea-shop, leaving careful instructions with both Alphonse and Gustave

that should there be any callers for her they were to be detained, as she would be back immediately.

The tea served her was over-strong, the bun dry. The place was crammed, the atmosphere hot and steamy. A luncher sitting opposite to her munched rabbit-like with strange contortions of nostrils and upper lip. The amalgamated odours of the varied foods made her feel qualmish. Coming out from the heated air, she shivered a little on meeting the east wind. Hastening back to the boarding-house, she found that no visitor had called for her.

The afternoon dragged past in the same unsatisfactory fashion as had the morning. The headache that throughout the day she had resolutely fought against conquered her. Nightfall found her stupid with a sense of confused pain in the head : pain so severe that for the time it held ascendancy over even her heartache.

Rousing herself, she went in to dinner and tried to eat, listening to, but scarcely comprehending, Mr. Rock's account of how—as he did not care to ask another to accompany him to see "The Little Michus"—he had got the theatre people to alter his tickets, so that he might occupy one seat on two successive nights.

When he quitted the table reluctantly after generously affording her a last chance of retraction—"Mind you, if you would care to come now, it's not too late yet"—Frances, leaving her pudding untouched, went upstairs. Still haunted by the notion that Trent might call, she did not undress but lay down covered with a rug, in readiness to

start up at any moment. At length the sound of the boarders dispersing to their rooms assured her that her hope had been a vain one. Rising wearily, she took off her clothes, and crept into bed.

The morning found her husky, feverish, languid. When, with the intention of rising she raised her heavy head from the pillow, she was glad to let it sink back again and lie inert.

Illness was rare with Frances. "Perhaps I am going to die," she thought, with a vague idea that, after all, that might afford an easy mode of escape from her conflicting emotions.

A maid, entering to make the bed and finding her prostrated, bore the news of Frances's illness to the manageress, who quickly appeared, her customary smile crossed by an expression of genuine concern. Encompassed by a thousand warring cares, she yet contrived to devote some precious moments to seeing that Frances had a freshly made cup of tea, and that the fire she had ordered was actually burning—not smouldering, as is the thrifty custom of fires that are charged for by the day.

A little later Mrs. Canvey, eager to seize the infrequent opportunity of enjoying any household task, voluntarily took in hand the nursing. Miss Canvey chanced to be spending a day or two with a friend in Surrey, and Frances was glad to be able to afford the old lady the cheap luxury of a seat by her fire, where she settled happily down after making sundry trips upstairs to fetch down her own private kettle and tea-things, and the subdued aged canary

who moped away his days in her chilly third-floor chamber.

Drugs relieved the pain in Frances's head and made her drowsy and regardless of the outer world. In the intervals of her own dozing it imparted a pleasant homelike appearance to the room to see Mrs. Canvey nodding placidly in the easy chair by the fire, her feet in soft slippers resting on the fender, her kettle singing on the hob.

Mrs. Canvey was an ideal nurse for a patient whose only requirement was companionship. When Frances wanted to be quiet, Mrs. Canvey was dumb. And she could prattle gently on unexciting subjects when the invalid felt brighter and was inclined for a chat.

It was on the afternoon of the third day when Frances, feeling quite free from pain, and almost inclined to apologize for her laziness, was sitting up in bed taking tea, that Clara Canvey returned, bringing a breath of cold air and an element of uncongeniality into the quiet room.

"Clara, can you tell Miss Grant what we paid for the rooms we had on the Marine Parade at Budcombe? I was telling her how well I felt that winter we stayed there, and I couldn't remember what we paid."

"Oh, it was cheap enough. Seventeen or eighteen shillings a week for rooms with attendance on the Parade. If you can call a dozen old-fashioned cottages a Marine Parade!"

"Oh, Clara!" Mrs. Canvey was gently expostulating. "I'm sure there must have been quite twenty houses. The one we lived in was number sixteen."

"Mrs. Canvey's description is nice——"

"Mother may have liked it. Nobody else would. Budcombe is a dead hole—a God-forsaken place. The people who live there are all retired folk who have crept there to die. And they are so conservative. We stayed there three months, and didn't get to know a soul. There was a notice up asking any visitor who wished the clergy to call, to put their card in a box in church. I put mother's in, and nobody came except a baby curate, and he wanted us to subscribe to a new window, or a children's treat or something. And the only entertainment we went to was a lecture at which the lantern wouldn't work!"

"But, Clara dear, you forget how bright and sheltered it was. The sun used to shine into our windows all day long. I could scarcely believe it was winter. And the tradespeople were most obliging. And although the residents did not visit us, they seemed very friendly with each other."

"I think I would like a place where I knew nobody."

"You can take my word for it you wouldn't know any one there. It would give you the hump in a week," Miss Canvey was assuring Frances, when a tap at the door introduced the manageress, who bore a message of farewell from Mr. Rock.

"Mr. Rock sends his compliments to you, Miss Grant, and he was sorry to leave without a chance of saying 'good-bye.' He asked me to give you his card, and to say that he hoped you would soon be better."

The card was squat and thick and unromantic.

It was lithographed, and besides the name, Herbert Rock, bore what was presumably Mr. Rock's business address :—Saddlery and Harness Works, Diddleswick.

“ Mr. Rock said he hadn't intended going for a day or two, but that some relative—an aunt, I think—had taken suddenly ill.”

So the Man had returned to the Midlands. It was with an inexplicable sense of loneliness and a sudden realization that Miss Canvey used cheap scent and had a rasping voice, that Frances lay back on her pillows, longing to be alone.



## CHAPTER XII

### FRANCES BURNS HER BOATS

**F**RANCES was better. Her cold had gone, and, though she still felt languid and shaky, she was able to venture as far as Lincoln's Inn in response to a summons from Chauncery, who wished to consult her on a matter of business.

"You look ill," he said, glancing at her critically, and noticing how, now that the flush born of the wind and the exercise had died away, she seemed pale and bright-eyed.

"I've been ill," Frances acknowledged. "Only a little chill, but it kept me in bed three days. I'm all right now."

Tom surveyed her dubiously.

"Quite sure?"

"Oh, yes. The cold has quite gone. I'm just a little shaky yet."

"I'll tell you what. You come along to luncheon in Half-Down Street." Chauncery's sympathy invariably took a practical turn. "Cynthia is sure to be at home at lunch time to-day. She said so at breakfast. She'll be delighted to see you,"—husbandlike, Chauncery took much for granted. "I want a quiet chat, too, so I'll come with you. I can get away quite easily. I've no engagement before half-past three," he insisted, and Frances gladly allowed herself to be persuaded.

Had Chauncery not announced his intention of accompanying her, Frances, who still felt nervously unstrung from the effect of her little illness, would hardly have cared to face her cousin alone. But with kindly Tom to support her she did not fear Cynthia's comments. Besides these days of sojourn amidst strangers had left her hungry for communion with those to whom her affairs were of personal interest. Even Cynthia's caustic remarks meant more to her than suave civilities from casual acquaintances, to whom her doings were of no real importance. Then again, though even to herself she refused to confess it, she was soul-famished for news of Mason Trent.

"You'll come? That's right. I'll send for a hansom, and we'll start at once."

Without giving her time to demur, Tom had hustled out of the room. A minute or two later he re-entered with a disappointed air. An important country client, brimming over with questions on which he required his solicitor's advice, had arrived just in time to catch him.

"I'm afraid I can't come, Fan. You must go alone. The cab is waiting, and I'll telephone to Cynthia that you are on the way."

Before she had time to formulate an objection Frances found herself in a hansom driving swiftly westwards.

Mrs. Chauncery was at home. But although the telephone had warned her of the approach of her uninvited guest, her manner was not effusive, in fact it was hardly even amiable. There was a distinct lack of urbanity in the welcome she ex-

tended her cousin, and her coldly appraising glance made Frances hotly conscious that she was wearing her second-best hat. The rain had reduced the feathers of her best one to the semblance of spiky herring bones. She wondered confusedly if it were possible that traces of her reduced circumstances were already visible in her appearance! Realizing quickly that such was hardly probable, another solution of Cynthia's lack of welcome flashed upon her.

"I hope I haven't chanced upon a party?" she asked anxiously, "but Tom assured me——"

"Oh, Tom never knows anything about my arrangements. It's no use telling him. He never pays the least attention," Cynthia was saying ungraciously, when Miss Bister entered. Frances's tell-tale heart gave a great throb when she saw that Mason Trent accompanied her.

"We met on the doorstep," Miss Bister explained with a self-conscious giggle.

It wounded Frances to find Trent greet her with the recognized courtesy that he would have shown any casual fellow-guest. To have him shake hands politely, and hear him make the conventional remarks respecting the weather! Had he revealed special feeling of any kind—resentment, displeasure, animosity: had he even vulgarly sulked, she would not have experienced the dull ache of despair induced by encounter with his unexpected attitude of urbane aloofness—this tacit admission that henceforward her concerns were things outside his life. The little episode that had threatened to play so important a part in his career had ended. According to

Trent's code of conduct, his only correct course of action lay in ignoring that it had ever existed.

Only for the first few moments did the presence of the additional guest prove a hindrance to the intimate discussion of the involved interests of the others. Frances speedily gathered that Miss Bister was to fill the place in the expedition to Biarritz left vacant by her secession.

Miss Bister, sublimely unconscious that the subject of the prospective journey might not be a welcome theme to the quiet relative of her hostess, who took no part in that branch of the conversation, returned again and again to the topic, with the persistence of one whose narrow brain has room for a single proposition at a time. And after the initial awkwardness had subsided Trent and Cynthia appeared also to forget the unobtrusive presence of Frances and chattered on unreservedly.

"Just fancy, Fanny! Ellaline is going to take her Mercédès! Isn't it sweet of her?" Cynthia exclaimed as though announcing a fact in which Frances might be expected to reveal a pleasant personal interest. "That will make us so delightfully independent—won't it?"

Frances made the expected murmur of assent. In a chill fashion she was conscious that, after all, Cynthia was benefiting pecuniarily by her own withdrawal. She had no motor to place at her cousin's disposal, and Cynthia's motor brougham was only hired by the month.

"We have arranged to go to the Royal. It is decidedly the smartest hotel. There is no use going to a place to enjoy ourselves and then feeling out of things. Is there?"

"Have you quite—when do you go?" Frances asked in a voice from which all colour had faded.

"On Tuesday."

"Oh! I do hope we shall have a good crossing. I suffer so dreadfully from sea-sickness," chimed in Miss Bister. "Really, after a bad crossing I am simply a wreck. It is weeks and weeks before I feel quite well again!"

"But what are your own plans?" Cynthia, suddenly becoming aware that Frances had a future, made perfunctory inquiry. "Have you decided yet where you are going to live?"

In the momentary pause that preceded her reply Frances knew that Trent, while sustaining a semblance of attention to the inanities Miss Bister bleated at his ear, was listening to catch her answer.

"Shall you stay on in town?"

"No, I am going to the country." Frances spoke with decision. An hour earlier she would have said that she did not know—that her plans were yet indefinite. But the observation of the last sixty minutes had shown her more clearly than anything else on earth could that Trent's interests had no longer any connection with hers. She felt a cowardly desire to run beyond reach of anything that would serve to remind her of him. A craving to hide herself amongst unknown people from whom it would be easy to conceal her suffering possessed her. She had clung to town even at its most trying season because in London she felt near him. Now seated at the same table it seemed as though no measurable distance could put them farther apart than they already were.

"Country—what part?" Cynthia was demanding.

"Seaside, I think. South coast."

"You won't endure it a week," Mrs. Chauncery made dismal prophecy. "You'll get the blues. The English seaside in spring is too appalling. Worse even than in tripper time. Those ghastly wind-swept promenades, and the melancholy bands, and the shivering invalids——"

"I shall not go to a fashionable place. There won't be any bands. No. I have not yet decided where. It will be some out-of-the-world place you have never heard of, I imagine."

"Well, I only hope you'll like it, if you do go," Cynthia had retorted with an indifferent shrug of her shoulders. "Every one to her taste. Biarritz is mine." She had already forgotten that a very short time ago it had been that of Frances also.

Luncheon ended, any chance Frances might have had of a quiet word with Trent was frustrated by Miss Bister's complacent presence. Cynthia had left them, and with feeble garrulity Miss Bister monopolized the lion's share of the conversation. From her prattle Frances gathered that since their recent introduction she had seen Trent almost daily. Frances noticed too that Miss Bister's photograph, pale-eyed and indefinite of feature, obtrusively elaborate of dress, had ousted from the place of honour her own likeness, which had been pushed into a less prominent position, whence by easy stages it would ultimately reach the oblivion awaiting it.

Cynthia had rejoined them, rustling in attired for driving in fur toque and mantle.

"Come, good people, if we want to make the most of the daylight we must be off. Fanny dear, I'm so sorry"—Cynthia could afford to be gracious—"but we had arranged to go to Cook's office this afternoon to make final arrangements and secure our places for the journey. So we must say good-bye."

They had moved downstairs as she spoke. At the door Miss Bister's electric landaulette, resplendent in dark green lined with mustard-colour—awaited their convenience, vibrating in the care of a chauffeur and footman upholstered to correspond,

"How are you going?" Cynthia asked, while Miss Bister was trying ineffectually to decide whether to have the carriage open or shut. "On foot. Well, it's beautifully bright for walking. We won't urge you to come with us. Four people crowded in a carriage is so appallingly suggestive of a beanfeast. Isn't it?"

They had moved off, Cynthia complaisant, Trent sleekly imperturbable, Miss Bister looking more indeterminate of tone by contrast to the crude mustard-coloured morocco of her cushions; and Frances was left alone on the pavement feeling as though they had whirled for ever out of her ken.

Returning by 'bus to Brandreth House, she wearily climbed the stairs, and gaining the sanctuary of her dingy back room threw herself on the bed.

The transitory strength lent by the excitement of meeting Trent had vanished, leaving her physically and mentally exhausted. Her one conscious craving was to get away from London and begin life anew elsewhere. Where, it mattered little, so that

FRANCES BURNS HER BOATS     III

it was a place apart from her past and present associations.

Fired with the strength of a sudden resolve, she sprang up, and without waiting even to smooth her tumbled hair, ran downstairs and entered the drawing-room where Mrs. Canvey—head on one side, cap awry—sat dozing in an easy chair drawn close to the radiator.

Aroused by Frances's abrupt entrance, she sat up with a jerk, blinking vacantly. At another time Frances might have been filled with compunction at having thus rudely awakened the sleeper. Just now she had no thought but of herself. Without apology or preliminary remark she plunged into the subject of her mission.

"Mrs. Canvey, I want you to give me the address of the lodgings you had at Budcombe."

"At Budcombe, my dear?" Mrs. Canvey's wits were yet astray in the world of dreams.

"Yes, that little town on the south coast where you stayed one winter, you know. I'm going there—I've quite decided—as soon as ever I can find rooms to go to!"



## CHAPTER XIII

### AN EGG TO TEA

IT was Tuesday morning. Reckless Frances, all her boats irretrievably burnt, was jogging in a fourwheeler—top-heavy with the burden of her five trunks—towards Waterloo Station. On her lap lay a packet of sandwiches, a parting gift from the boarding-house management; in her heart was a dominating sense of blankness.

Now, for the first time that morning, did she find herself at leisure to observe the weather. Breakfast had been served by artificial light, and the outer air was peculiarly gloomy and oppressive. A dense cloud overhung the city. There was a curious absence of wind, that sensation of ominous stillness that experienced Londoners recognize as the forerunner of a fog. Seen through the opaque atmosphere, the hurrying passers-by lost all individuality, and appeared merely dark figures silhouetted against a drab-hued background.

Turning into the wider thoroughfare of Kingsway, it was with something of surprise that Frances realized that above the impenetrable pall of cloud the sun might yet be shining. Crossing the river, water and sky showed like uniformity of dingy tone, broken only by sundry dark masses that she guessed were barges, and by an overhanging span that she fancied might be a bridge. All was ghostly, unreal, mysterious.

There was no one at the station to see her off. Important business had called Chauncery to York, and Cynthia was engrossed in the preparations for her own journey. The fact that Frances had received no communication from Trent did not prevent her treacherous fancy imagining that he might appear to wish her God-speed. She had forgotten that she was a third-class passenger now.

Early February is not a busy season with the South Devon trains. For the first portion of the journey Frances had the felicity of a carriage to herself, and it was with an acute sense of relief in leaving London that she leant back in her window seat as the train steamed through Battersea, with its countless closely-packed streets of humble dwellings, whose myriads of squat chimneys breathed soot to the musky air.

That part of her life, she told herself, was ended, that leaf turned over. The unknown future stretching before her appeared grey and totally void of interest. But Frances came of a valiant race. She bravely resolved to make the best of things, promising her pride that whatever she might secretly endure she would show no coward face to the world.

The train had already passed through the more thickly populated region, the houses were a little larger, not so crowded together, though every empty patch of ground was seamed with new-made roads, and scarred with excavations that denoted buildings in process. Stacks of drain-pipes showed that the octopus town was extending its tentacles far into the country. Over all the same sombre cloud seemed suspended.

The scene was not inspiring. Turning her eyes inwards, Frances found mental exhilaration in the recollection of Tom Chauncery's parting words. Words spoken on the previous day when she had her final business interview at his offices—an interview that left her poorer than it had opened by several hundred pounds a year.

"Now that this is done, Fanny," he had said, indicating the documents she had been signing,—  
"I must tell you that, though as your solicitor I am bound to think you an exceedingly improvident and altogether foolish young person, yet, as a mere man, I admire you tremendously!"

Chauncery's unexpected commendation sent a warm glow to her chilled heart. Frances had a sincere affection for her cousin's husband. She liked the tolerance with which he regarded his wife's purely personal foibles, while she respected the firmness he exhibited when any of Cynthia's affectations threatened to trespass into what he esteemed his special preserves. Frances smiled at the recollection of an incident that had occurred in the Chauncerys' early married life when she, then a schoolgirl, had chanced to be visiting them.

Cynthia, fired by the ambition to impart a more distinguished tone to their appellation, had, without taking the trouble to consult her husband's inclination in the matter, got their name printed on visiting cards as "Vere Chauncery."

"No, thank you. No Vere Chauncerys for me," Tom had said bluntly. "T. V. Chauncery was what I was known as at school, and if T. V. Chauncery has been good enough for me up till now I think

it will do till the end. You have my full permission to christen your second husband what you please." So saying he had taken up the cards—"Five hundred of them, and of the very *best* quality," as Cynthia had wailed—and brutally thrown them in the fire.

As Frances mused, the train was rushing westwards, every pant of the engine taking her farther and farther from the London that had treated her so cavalierly. It hastened past where the red-roofed villas of Esher peeped through the dull air, crossed the sandy wastes near Aldershot, and plunged into the bald monotony of Wiltshire, where the chalk, outcropping through the mould, offered dismal suggestion of the bones of some ill-buried skeleton.

Turning from depressing outer influences, Frances produced her notebook, and made a serious attempt to begin that detailed account of her expenditure that she had determined to keep. Sedulously noting down such of her disbursements as she could remember—a small proportion, unfortunately—she then sought to make the amount spent agree with the sum in hand. But try as she might, her accounts refused to make even a pretence of balancing.

When in despair Frances shoved her notebook back into her dressing bag, she found they had journeyed beyond the wide bare spaces of Wilts and the wooded slopes of Dorset, and that the sun was shining down on the tumbled lands of Devon over which they were passing.

Opening the window, Frances leant out watching the swift moving panorama of undulating grass-green meadows and small red fields grouped about quaint

thatched cottages, from whose chimneys the smoke of wood fires rose fragrant on the still air.

After the weary monotony of greys through which she had travelled, each hint of vivid colour afforded her the keenest pleasure ; the blue linen coat of an old hedge-cutter, the red tam-o-shanter of a girl cyclist, the silver-white of birch woods, the chestnut-brown of pollard willows, the azure of sky, pool-reflected, the purple haze of undergrowth.

A blaze of yellow crocus at a wayside station filled her with delight. She felt as though she would have liked to warm her hands at their glory. The unexpected sight of the golden cups brought a suggestion that here winter might be over. The sight of a bevy of young lambkins gambolling in the shelter of a high wooded bank brought the assurance that it was.

"It is spring—spring, and I had not even guessed it!" Frances reproached herself.

Alighting at a junction, she had changed into an odd little train that zig-zagged its way on a single line for a dozen miles down a valley stretching seawards. A river, its banks sentinelled by the ghosts of last year's bulrushes, its clear waters mirroring the sky, played hide and seek with the line ; sometimes meandering demurely along on one side, anon ducking under a bridge to reappear at the other.

With a jarring of brakes the train drew up at the little station. "Budcombe," shouted a porter ; and stepping out, Frances found herself one of half a dozen passengers. Four were decidedly local ; the portmanteau and golf-club of the other proclaimed him a bird of passage.

A cumbrous conveyance which purported to be

the 'bus of the Budcombe Hotel was the only vehicle in waiting. And into it Frances and her less bulky belongings were packed, her heavy luggage piled outside. The golfing devotee, after a glance at Frances's numerous boxes, left his traps in the care of the 'bus driver, and set off at a swinging pace down the steep road leading townwards.

Passing the disappointingly new houses on the Station Road, the 'bus lumbered on down the crooked main street of the town, turning off with a lurch to the left just before the street threatened to end on the cobble stones of the beach. Looking eagerly out of her prison on wheels, Frances realized that the row of old-fashioned detached cottages along which they were progressing must be the Marine Parade.

The vehicle drew up with a final lurch in front of a dwelling that outwardly bore a close resemblance to the houses on either side. Like them it was two-storeyed, and the strip of lawn running towards the road was bordered by similar breast-high hedges of closely clipped escallonia. There was nothing smart or even distinctive about the appearance of her new home, but the afternoon sun was shining full on its windows, and Frances, who, like the best of us, was superstitious, regarded the welcoming radiance as a good omen.

The rooms she had engaged were not those the Canveys had occupied. Their former landlady, in reply to Frances's inquiries, had regretted that her rooms were taken, but had recommended those of her neighbour, Mrs. Lett. And having secured the rooms for a trial fortnight, it was to Mrs. Lett's house that Frances was bound.

Signs of preparation for her arrival were not wanting. Smoke rose above the chimney that she rightly imagined belonged to her sitting-room, and the 'bus had hardly stopped at the little gate, before Mrs. Letts precipitated herself from the side entrance whence she had watched its arrival, and hastened down the narrow gravel path to greet the traveller.

Mrs. Lett, who was a neat pleasant-faced woman, wore the black silk apron that was her insignia as an employer of labour; the said labour being represented by the most immature serving-maid who ever donned a cap—a being whose sole faculty appeared to be an almost incredible capacity for getting in the way.

"You'll be tired, Miss. You've come a long journey," Mrs. Lett remarked sympathetically, relieving the lodger of her burdens. Frances knew that since leaving Bloomsbury she had travelled a much greater distance than the good lady guessed. She wondered if it would surprise her landlady to learn that she had journeyed right out of her old life into a new one!

Under Mrs. Lett's guidance the big trunks had bumped up the narrow staircase, and found resting-place in a commodious bedroom; for, by a topsy-turvey arrangement that chanced to suit their present occupier exactly, Mrs. Lett's upstairs apartments were a large bedroom and a small sitting-room. And Frances had paid the 'bus fare, and had thereby gained her first insight into the moderation of Budcombe charges.

She had surveyed the bed-chamber without glancing beyond the carefully screened and curtained

casement, but when she entered the sitting-room and saw what lay beyond the blurred glass of the window-panes, Frances had no eyes to spare for anything indoors. It was with a keen sense of joy that she realized that beyond the shred of lawn and across the strip of concrete pavement lay the sea, now in happily quiescent mood rippling under the sunshine.

The knowledge that Budcombe was situated on the sea had suggested to her little more than a vague notion of the sea as familiar to frequenters of English watering-places : an element to be barricaded off by glaring esplanades, spanned by hideous piers, hedged in by aquariums and concert halls. And lo ! here at her very door lay the real living sea. The waters that rippled in the sunshine not a stone's throw from her window were those that had beat in sun-warmed surf about the shores of her West Indian home.

Frances was still standing engrossed when Mrs. Lett's kindly Devon voice recalled her to more material considerations.

" And about food, Miss ? You didn't send any instructions. Have you provided anything ? "

" Food ! "

For the first time it occurred to this stumbler in narrow ways that private lodgings differed from either a hotel or a boarding-house in that their occupant was expected to order individually anything in the nature of provender required.

" Oh, no ! I'm afraid I forgot all about it. How stupid of me ! "

She felt dismayed, starvation seemed imminent ; but Mrs. Lett was a woman of resource.

" The kettle is boiling, Miss. And if you'd fancy



a cup of tea and a nice poached egg an' a bit of buttered toast, I could let you have 'em at once."

"Oh, thank you! How kind of you to think of it! That will do admirably," Frances acquiesced gratefully, glad to be relieved of any decision in the matter, and almost surprised to find the idea of a poached egg arouse interest in her mind. For the first time for days she found herself regarding the prospect of eating with pleasant anticipation.

The tea-table was already laid. A small fire burned in the grate. Frances held out her hands to the fire because it looked so cosy, then threw open the window because it was so warm.

Regarding the room as her own, Frances viewed it with the wilfully purblind gaze of proprietorship. She was resolutely blind to its manifold faults, refused to see that it was small, and low of ceiling, that its carpet was undeniably old, its overmantel obtrusively new. She shut her eyes to the fact that every available article of furniture was crowded with absurd little ornaments, most of them duplicated, and none of them exceeding in value a few pence. The one thing of which she was conscious in every fibre of her exultant being was that this little first floor sitting-room, whatever its demerits, was *hers*, that here she could be alone, here enjoy the priceless luxury of solitude.

With a half sob of relief she turned to the open window. The sweet soft air came in, bringing with it a sound unfamiliar as yet, but one that in variant keys was destined to form accompaniment to some of the most vital passages of her life—it was the gentle *grind, grind* of the cobble stones on the beach, as the ever restless sea washed them against each other.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BYEWAYS AT BUDCOMBE

**B**Y the time her solitary tea was finished, the February evening was drawing in, and Frances realized that there was no chance of surveying her surroundings that night. The pleasure of exploration must await the morrow. Meanwhile she resolved to follow Mrs. Lett's suggestion, and go shopping.

Walking along the Parade, in whose houses lights were already beginning to twinkle, she reached the main thoroughfare of the town, a wide irregular street from which, like the spikes from the backbone of a herring, little alleys and wynds and passages extended on either side.

The street marked the course of the valley or coombe from which the little town took its name. And to the unaccustomed eyes of Frances it seemed deliciously absurd to find a rivulet quietly meandering down one side of the way, its course crossed by many tiny bridges, each one affording access to some old-world dwelling, or shop with quaintly out-jutting front.

Higher up, near where the station road branched off, the shops were more imposing, sported a modern air, had larger windows, showed brighter lights.

Brought abruptly face to face with the necessity

of provisioning a larder for one person, Frances, whose only experience of housekeeping had been on a large scale and in another country, felt decidedly at a disadvantage. It was the first time in her life that she had been brought into actual contact with food in the raw, and she felt helpless and ignorant.

It had seemed a simple matter, at Mrs. Lett's suggestion, to order bacon for breakfast. But when the provision merchant blandly inquired what quantity he might have the pleasure of sending, Frances was unable to reply, and stood mute, feeling tongue-tied and foolish.

"A—pound?" he prompted, observing a hitch.

"Oh, yes. A pound, please," Frances acquiesced. "And a pound of butter."

Quick to act upon a hint, Frances ordered a pound of coffee and the same measure of tea and sugar. She had cherished a momentary idea of ordering a chest of tea, but the hesitation in Mr. Hinck's manner when she mentioned a chest drove her back to the facile pound.

Worn out by the exertions and excitements of the day, Frances, after a light supper, went early to bed. Some places, like certain people, attract one at first sight. Even thus early in their acquaintance she had a comforting assurance that she had taken a right step in coming to Budcombe.

Her bedroom window was open; each wave as it washed the beach sent a sibilant shiver along the stones, the sound dying away in a moaning swish that lulled her pleasantly off to sleep.

She slept heavily, awaking in the winter dawn with palpitating heart and a sense of utter depression. The painful thoughts that in her waking hours she had so bravely held at bay had taken advantage of her unconsciousness to steal back to her sleeping brain and arouse her with their bitter poignancy. For a space she tried to ignore them, sought forcibly to drag her thoughts into fresh channels. But the humiliating knowledge that, untrammelled by her desolation, Trent was already on his way to Biarritz, rendered her effort fruitless.

With a hope of breaking the continuity of thought, Frances jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

All was tranquil. By the light of early morning the sea was a still grey sheet that merged without visible division into the horizon. The little esplanade was clean as though newly swept; in the tall lamp-posts the gas-jets still burned faintly. Unseen birds twittered in the eaves. Amongst the cobblestones the sea was whispering—whispering.

Comforted by this glimpse of a new world, Frances dropped the corner of the blind she had raised, and, her insurgent heart soothed, crept back to bed.

Kindly Budcombe seemed determined to show her its most enticing aspect. The sea was sparkling in the sunshine when she awoke later. The gulls that made their feeding-place on the foreshore were poising and swooping in the warm air. A fisherman clad in maritime blue jersey was rolling along the Parade, a basket of fish on his arm.

Frances breakfasted with her window wide open. Oh! the delight of having a window she could

throw up or pull down as she liked, without feeling impelled to consult any one's convenience but her own! Oh! the boon of being able to temper the atmosphere to suit her own individual requirements, the unspeakable relief of not having to encounter strangers before the day is aired, of not being forced before she had fed, to bob her head politely and wish people, in whom she had no earthly interest, "Good morning!"

The arrangements for her solitary breakfast, too, curiously pleased her. It was so "homey" and nice to find the tea-caddy on the table, the kettle singing on the hob, the covered bacon-dish and toast-rack keeping warm on the hearth.

Conscience counselled the wisdom of employing the morning in unpacking. But it was far too alluring a day to waste indoors, Frances assured herself as excuse for truancy. She would devote the early hours, at least, to exploring her new surroundings.

Putting on her hat and coat, and telling the juvenile maid—who was removing the breakfast things as fast as her overweening interest in the new lodger would allow—that she would return at one o'clock to luncheon, Frances walked quickly to the gate, and there pausing looked to right and left, uncertain in which direction to proceed.

The sight of high red cliffs rising steeply to the west tempted her. Moving briskly along the narrow path that bordered the portion of the cobble-strewn beach where the few fishing-boats were drawn up, and where the Budcombe fishermen gossiped as they spread their nets, or lounged

beside their lobster-pots, Frances braced herself for a climb.

Near its base the landward side of the path was bordered by a high brick wall pierced by unromantic wooden doors. As the path crept farther up the steep edge of the cliff the road widened, and in many instances the reticent wooden doors gave place to gates through which one could catch a glimpse of gardens where daffodils were in the bud and snow-drops and crocuses were a-bloom.

Up and up she climbed until the walled gardens made way for fields and the fields for a golf-course ; and Frances could look down, past the furze and briar that edged the cliff, to where far beneath, a white scarf of foam marked the verge of the tide.

Pausing on the summit to take breath, she rested herself on a conveniently placed bench and, turning, looked back at the little town, whose red and grey roofed houses were huddled about the base and sides of the valley. From where she sat she could look down the steep path up which she had come, past the idling fishermen, and along the entire length of the little Parade, from its abrupt beginning at the abrupt end of the main street, to where it dwindled mildly to a mere sandy path that ran under the low red cliff, above which the buildings of the coast-guard station perched like a covey of white birds. Farther east still the Bud river widened into a tidal lake, beyond which the rocks of Dragon Bay sent a long reef of rock jutting far out into the sea.

To the west the winding path descended into the deep chine that divided the cliff ; then ascend-

ing the farther side, it mounted higher and yet higher. Frances would fain have followed the path, had not discretion, backed by an incipient ache in her unaccustomed muscles, restrained her. Finding a nook snugly sheltered by a hedge of thorn and holly, she rested there, listening to the crooning murmur of the wavelets far beneath. She longed to hasten back to densely crowded London to assure the cramped populace that there was still space, and clear air, and sunshine in England for everybody.

Hunger at length prompted her return. At the door the little maid received her with breathless reproof.

"Please, Miss, Missis said as how you went out and never left no orders about your dinner. So she cooked 'e a rasher and some potatoes, and made 'e an apple dumpling!"

"Didn't leave no orders about dinner! No more I didn't, neither!" retorted Frances gaily. "Tell Mrs. Lett I'm so famished I could eat anything."

A little rest and an early cup of tea were followed by a stroll through the town, ostensibly for the purpose of buying a newspaper and ordering something for supper. (Mrs. Lett, whose predilection in the animal kingdom seemed to be towards sheep, had suggested a mutton chop.) The paper afforded Frances the welcome news that the fog with which, on the previous day, London had been threatened, had speedily become a dense fact that showed no sign of termination. Frances shuddered as she pictured Brandreth House in a fog—the pale faces of the boarders seen through the dim artificial light,

the fireless stifling rooms, her cramped and gloomy back bedroom, the patient enduring plane tree outside.

As she walked up the street, Frances found herself observing the Budcombe residents with a specific and personal interest that she had never felt in London people. There the inhabitants were so numerous that one thought of them in a bulk. In Budcombe, as Frances discovered, it was easy, and soon became extremely interesting to think of them as individuals.

After the anxious hurry that characterized each atom of the London crowds, she found the Budcombe folks' air of leisure distinctly attractive. Another thing that pleased her was the evident terms of frank good fellowship on which everybody seemed to be with everybody else.

As the days slipped by and Frances gradually became better acquainted with her surroundings, she became aware that Budcombe was one of those charming little-known places to which the wise ones retire when, their active part in the world's work being over, they are free to choose their locality. It was a place such as those who have a comparatively small income to spend, and who cherish a natural desire to get the best monetary, climatic and social value for their money, have a genius for discovering, and a perfectly sane mania for keeping to themselves.

To go out shopping on a bright morning was to meet women chatting in little groups, to see younger folks hail each other gaily, to overhear arrangements for golf or tennis. After her first



thirst for loneliness had been slacked, the atmosphere of "hail-fellow-well-metness" made Frances feel a little lonely. She would have liked to know some of the pretty girls who always looked so healthy and so energetic, and who so evidently dressed more with a view to utility than grace. The Budcombe cult was that of beauty unadorned. So the maidens wore their skirts cut short over their slender ankles, thrust their neat feet into thick-soled sensible boots, and were athletic and happy.

The matrons, too, seemed brisk, comely, energetic, as though life with them moved easily and pleasantly. And though few of the men were young, they had the air of juvenescence, that aspect of physical well-being that bodily ease and mental freedom from care alone can bestow. The Budcombe residents were always busy, but it was with play, not work.

Frances would not have felt such a rank outsider had she but known that her own unheralded arrival—the appearance of a distinguished-looking girl in mourning, living alone, and apparently without any friends in the district—had given rise to interested comment. Doubtless many of the girls would have liked to know her, but in Budcombe there is an unwritten, albeit strictly enforced law, that, un-introduced, none can penetrate to the inner circle.

Frances did not guess that the old Admiral, who never covered his white locks with a hat and who always wore a plaid, was the accepted censor of Budcombe society; and that when enthusiastic little Janey Sedge tentatively suggested making the acquaintance of Frances—"It could easily be

done," declared Janey, "I often meet her in the library when I am changing mother's books, and she always looks so sweet and so lonely, and I would just pick up the book she was returning and ask if it was nice, and we could talk about books. It would really be quite easy"—in his character of public censor the Admiral felt impelled to dissuade warm-hearted Janey from her purpose. Speaking as a man of the world, he counselled delay. Nothing, he was of opinion, would be gained by precipitance. It seemed strange that so attractive and youthful a lady should have chosen to come to a town where she obviously knew no one, and if—as reported by Mrs. Lett's brother-in-law, who was the Admiral's gardener—the lady was likely to reside for a lengthened period at Budcombe, a probation extending over a few weeks would be an immaterial matter.

After a catering fiasco that left her with a huge leg of cold mutton—a joint so large that, in spite of Mrs. Lett's skill in converting portions into curry, rissoles, or what the callow maid designated "an 'ash," it haunted her board for nearly a week—Frances took Mrs. Lett's advice before ordering anything. And that good lady being an adept in the preparation of dishes calculated to suit the appetite of one person, the consultations resulted greatly to her advantage.

It surprised and pleased her when she had got into the way of buying only the small quantities that were necessary, to find how economically and yet comfortably she could live. Thirty shillings she found amply sufficed to cover the cost of food,

apartments, washing, and library. She contrived to live respectably and yet reserve half of her income for other expenses. In London it had been almost impossible to go out without spending money, even if it were only a sixpence for a 'bus fare, or a few coppers to a beggar. In Budcombe there were no 'buses—except the station 'bus, and a drive in that ranked as an event—and no beggars. Though no one appeared obtrusively rich, nobody was poor. Everybody seemed in a position to make amusement the business of life.

“Mrs. Lett”—Frances spoke half jestingly one day when that dame had from her description identified the be-plaided gentleman without a hat as Admiral Wyon—“I don't believe a man in this town—except the shop-keepers, of course—ever does any work?”

“Oh, *no*, Miss!” Mrs. Lett spoke reprovingly. “You surely forget—there's the clergyman, and the doctor, and the banker.”

“Oh!” said Frances.

## CHAPTER XV

### A HUSBAND IN A HAZE

**B**UT, as Frances speedily found, even in Devonshire the sun did not always shine. The brilliant weather that had welcomed her to Budcombe was succeeded by a spell of grey gloomy days, when sea and sky were a uniform leaden hue—when the radiant element that had power to transform even the baldest feature of nature into beauty had vanished, and all looked as dull and expressionless as a blank wall.

Then it was that Frances began to wonder if she had exaggerated the charm of the little coast town. The lack of vitality in the air made her inert, discontented. She came perilously near imagining that she had already exhausted its resources.

The period of atmospheric depression culminated in a storm. For three long days a strong southwest wind beat upon the coast, bringing with it driving rain, salt with sea-spray. There were days when Frances, penned in her little sitting-room, afraid to venture out against the gale, experienced the irksomeness of the solitude in which so lately she had gloried. Days when from morning till night, and from night till morning, rain or snippets of hail stung the window-panes; and the tempest that shook the house and roared in the chimneys

sent huge breakers, tawny with the sand they had torn up from the shallows, dashing in geysers of foam over the edge of the little Parade. Days when the confiding whisper of the beach was changed to muffled thunder, as the great rollers churned up the stones.

At first Frances regarded the breaking waves with something of exhilaration. But soon the noise wearied her, and the wind gusts, tugging and straining at the little house, made her feel restless and insecure. The rain that lashed so incessantly at the panes, blurring her view and limiting her world down to the interior of one small room, gave her a feeling of imprisonment. It amazed her to see that the sea-gulls, sweeping in mid air or lightly poising on broad wings, were not swept away by the gale.

Certain minor irritations added to her discomfort. The penetrating wind found entrance by the chinks of the loosely-hung window. Her sitting-room chimney, actuated by the perversity that occasionally governs inanimate objects, developed a habit of emitting at unexpected moments puffs of smoke which effectually repelled any inclination Frances might have entertained of turning to it for comfort.

Having all these minor grievances to contend with, it was not surprising that Frances had already begun to mope, when the arrival of a letter from Cynthia—the first one with which she had been favoured—plunged her into utter misery.

Mrs. Chauncery's large handwriting did not leave room for much reference to anything outside her own concerns. She was having a perfectly divine time, she said. She did not think they would return

until London got tolerable. She expected Tom to join them for Easter, though he said he couldn't spare the time. If he did, they would probably all journey home together. The weather had been glorious. They had been motoring all over the place.

"At Miss Bister's expense," Frances thought, with unaccustomed cynicism. "That will suit Cynthia exactly!"

At the close of her eulogies, as though by afterthought, Mrs. Chauncery had squeezed in a reference to her cousin's affairs.

She wondered what plans Frances had made for the future? Everybody agreed that it did not look quite *nice* for Frances to go on living by herself. Would it not be better for her to share rooms with another lady? People must think it queer—a girl of her age living quite alone.

"I wish Cynthia only knew how little people bother their heads about me," Frances thought dismally. "I might walk all over Budcombe on my head for all the notice anybody would take!"

The implication in Cynthia's letter that Mason Trent was enjoying himself seemed to put the crowning stroke to her misery. Before she realized that she was crying, a tear had dropped on to the note in her lap.

Determined not to give way to low spirits, Frances jumped up and, putting on a mackintosh and tying a scarf over her hat, set out, ostensibly to battle her way to the library, but really to escape from the thralldom of her own thoughts.

As Frances, keeping close to the wall, turned the corner leading abruptly into the main street, a gust

of wind blew her right into the arms of a lady who had been cautiously approaching from the opposite direction.

In the ensuing moment of disentanglement and of mutual apology, the kindly short-sighted eyes of her assailant, observing Frances closely, saw the traces of recent tears in her blue eyes, and the curve of present pain on her lips. Obedient to the prompting of a generous heart, she made an excuse to detain her.

"I wonder if you will think me rude if I ask you to see me home? This dreadful storm has blown my eye-glasses away, and I am so helpless without them—quite blind really. As my husband used to say, what I want is a dog and a string! Of course you mustn't think of coming if you are going to any place special. Only going to the library? Then that is nice of you. My house is not far. It is the second house on High Terrace. My name is Mrs. Penderby, dear. What is yours?"

The sheltered wynd leading to her companion's home branched off from the main streets. A couple of palms, still wearing their winter overcoats of sacking, stood sentinel before "The Eyrie," as the lettering on the gate-post proclaimed the dwelling to be named.

"Come in, dear, and have a cup of tea and a chat with me. No, I won't take a refusal," Mrs. Penderby added, as Frances hesitated. "I'm all alone, and tea will just be ready."

And Frances, soul-hungry for human commune after the famine of the past few weeks, without further demur followed her guide indoors.

The first glimpse of the interior suggested the abode of a mighty hunter rather than that of a tranquil matron. Stuffed heads of horned beasts stared glassily from the walls. Skins of ferocious animals offered foot-traps for the unwary. The mingled odours of furs, sandalwood and naphthaline smote sensitive nostrils.

Mrs. Penderby's drawing-room had that peculiarly attractive air of home that a nice woman imparts to the room she sits in. By contrast with the storm without, on this tempestuous March afternoon it looked especially alluring.

The tea-table drawn close to the hearth was already spread. Over a spirit lamp a copper-kettle was singing. A covered dish of crumpets kept warm on a brass trivet before the fire.

Five minutes after Frances had tripped over the puma skin that guarded the entrance-hall, she found herself telling her hostess that it was quite a month since she had entered any rooms except her own. And Mrs. Penderby had told Frances that, having seen her at church, and at the library, she had recognized her as a stranger, and seeing that she was alone had longed to speak to her—would have done so sooner, but that having on one occasion, out of sheer sympathy, spoken to a shabby visitor, she had discovered with dismay that the mean-appearing stranger considered herself a very great personage indeed, and esteemed Mrs. Penderby to have taken a liberty!

Mrs. Penderby had a gift of attracting confidence, perhaps because she gave it. Before long, Frances had told her of her uncle's sudden death, and had



heard how Mrs. Penderby's husband, who had been an Indian judge—a great sportsman who had never had a day's illness in his life—had died on his way home to England, and had been buried in the Red Sea.

The afternoon had faded into evening, before Frances, cheered and invigorated by her visit, returned to her storm-battered nest on the Marine Parade. The wind was falling. A touch of rose in the sunset sky gave promise of brighter days to dawn. Frances felt distinctly happier. Her one regret was that her new-found friend was leaving next afternoon to spend a fortnight at Bath.

"Whenever I return I shall invite some nice people to meet you, and after that everything will be easy," Mrs. Penderby had declared. "When you know them, nobody can be nicer or more hospitable than the Budcombe folks, but you've got to know them first."

As it chanced to be the weekly evening that the embryonic maid got her night out for the purpose of attending a "Children's Happy Evening," Mrs. Lett appeared in person to spread the supper-table. When, more by way of gaining information than of giving it, Frances spoke of her adventure, she found her landlady loud in praise of Mrs. Penderby.

"There's no lady better liked or higher respected in the town, Miss. Always so kind and charitable, she is. She came here first for her husband's health. Very bad-like he was when he came, poor dear gentleman. Anybody could have told as he hadn't long to live."

A vague sense of discrepancy confused Frances.

"But I thought Mrs. Penderby was a widow when she came here?"

"Oh, no, Miss! Many's the time on sunny days I used to see her walking up and down the Parade beside her husband's chair. A very tall thin gentleman he was, with a long grey beard."

Frances was puzzled. The photograph the widow had shown as the last taken of her husband—it was a snap-shot taken on board the P. and O. on which he made his last journey—had depicted her spouse as a short stout clean-shaven man, the antithesis of Mrs. Lett's recollection.

"He was an Indian judge, wasn't he?" Frances was clutching at a corroborative straw.

"Not as *I* ever heard on, Miss. A rector with private means, they said he was, somewheres in Oxfordshire, before his health broke down."

"You're *quite* certain we're speaking of the same person?" Frances was becoming desperate. "I mean the Mrs. Penderby who lives in the house with the palms up on High Terrace."

"There's only one Mrs. Penderby in Budcombe, Miss," Mrs. Lett made laconic reply, as she ended an unproductive argument by carrying off the tray.

Doubts assailed Frances. Could this charmingly hospitable woman, who had proved herself so kind and sympathetic, be a fraud? The very atmosphere of "well-gathered" respectability that pervaded her home seemed to flout any suspicion of the adventuress. "Besides, what could any one gain by being good to me? I have nothing to lose," Frances thought, and determined to allow no mistrust of the

one person in Budcombe who had befriended her to find resting-place in her mind.

Something in the pleasant home atmosphere of Mrs. Penderby's house, and in the inspiring effect of her companionship, had roused in Frances a healthy spirit of emulation. Although even to herself she had not confessed it, a forlorn hope that Trent might return had tempted her to defer really settling down, and kept her from unpacking her boxes. Now that Cynthia's letter had clearly shown the fallacy of that dream, she was resolved to delay no longer.

Summoning Mrs. Lett she craved permission to replace certain articles of furniture by some valued possessions of her own. A permission which Mrs. Lett—her chagrin at the inference that the garniture of her best sitting-room could be improved upon, counterbalanced by the assumption that the stay of so desirable a lodger as Miss Grant was likely to be an extended one—readily bestowed.

Hastening out before the post-office closed, Frances dispatched instructions that sundry cases at present stored in London should be forwarded to her at once. Returning home, she spent an interested hour in surveying her surroundings, and in mentally signing a sentence of exile upon certain of the more obtrusive articles of furniture, in common with countless fidgetty little ornaments, and a plethora of disquieting wall decorations in the form of Japanese fans, wall-pockets, gimcrack baskets, dyed pampas grass and elaborately framed photographs of successive generations of the different branches of the Lett family.

The consciousness of a definite labour awaiting

her gave a pleasant sense of interest to next morning's awakening, a sense that the reception of a letter from Tom Chauncery changed to positive excitement.

"I have just heard from Cynthia"—Tom must have had a letter by the same mail as herself, Frances thought. "Your sadly unchaperoned condition seems to be giving her grave concern. So, by way of remedying the matter, I think I will bring Nannie down to Budcombe, and we will devote my Easter holiday to chaperoning you. Cynthia half expects me to join her at Biarritz, but when she learns the righteous motive that detains me in England she is sure to appreciate my unselfishness, or if she doesn't she ought to! I hope to come next Wednesday. Meanwhile, if you conveniently can, you might engage rooms near yours for Nannie and me. Should there be any difficulty in finding them, of course we can go to the hotel."

There is much of give and take in lodging-house life. When, in happy excitement, Frances consulted Mrs. Lett regarding shelter for her friends, Mrs. Lett suggested Miss Mithen's next door, who had recommended Miss Grant to her. And Frances, rushing impetuously to make inquiry, found that by some lucky chance Miss Mithen's upstairs rooms would be vacant at the required time, and instantly secured them.

With the sudden cessation of the storm spring appeared to have come in all its blithe affluence. The sky was blue, the air balmy. The budding foliage seemed visibly to increase. Frances, hastening out to do her shopping before settling down—in a borrowed apron—to the congenial task of overturning Mrs. Lett's household gods, looked so radiant that

little Janey Sedge, who encountered her in the post office telegraphing a joyous reply to Tom, ventured to hazard a remark about the storm, which, it appeared, had the temerity to overthrow a summer-house in the Sedges' garden.

All Budcombe seemed afoot that bright morning. The street was quite busy. Coming out of the butcher's Frances met Mrs. Penderby looking the embodiment of handsome middle-age. She carried a bulky parcel carefully wrapped in voluminous tissue paper.

"You've just been to the butcher's, dear? I always feel wicked when I go there," she remarked, in the confidential way that made her so attractive. "My husband was such an ardent vegetarian, and so abhorred the idea of bloodshed in any form, that even though he has been dead for several years—and although I never really shared his views though I adopted them to please him—I cannot yet eat a cutlet without feeling guilty of murder!"

"Yes, those are flowers," she acknowledged, when Frances remarked on the fragrance exhaled by the parcel she carried. "It is a wreath. I am going to the cemetery. As I am going away this afternoon I wished to renew the flowers on my husband's grave before I left."

"Red Sea—Budcombe churchyard—great sportsman—anti-bloodshed!" Frances thought as, pausing, she watched the widow's dignified figure entering the church gates. "Well, I can't help loving Mrs. Penderby, because she is the only person who has been nice to me in Budcombe; but I do wish I knew whether she was a picturesque liar, or merely suffered from a defective memory!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE SOUL OF MISS BISTER

**T**HE evening of the Wednesday preceding Easter found Frances on the little platform of Budcombe station, awaiting the arrival of the train that was to bring Tom and Nannie Chauncery.

The very prospect of their coming held a joy unknown save to those who, while possessing sociable souls, have for weeks had no company but their own. To have her own people within reach, to be able to exchange ideas, to talk with them unreservedly, seemed to Frances's starved brain to hold attraction greater than that offered by some State entertainment.

And the Chauncerys were little less delighted than she. In quitting London and its engrossing duties, Tom appeared to have shaken off the weight of years. In exchanging the frock-coat and tall hat of professional life for the Norfolk suit and tweed cap of freedom, he had laid aside also his staid professional manner; had become boyish, irresponsible, gay.

As for Nannie Chauncery, she was overflowing with that tide of irrepressible spirits peculiar to a schoolgirl on vacation. She loved Frances and adored her father. The holidays he contrived to steal with her were the bright spots of her life—a rather grey

life, for Cynthia Chauncery was totally void of motherly affection.

Mrs. Chauncery was a mother—under protest. She had esteemed herself the victim of an untoward fate when she realized the likelihood of maternity, and resolved that so handicapping a catastrophe should not again occur.

Had her baby proved to be a son, she might have felt more reconciled to the responsibility. Had the child even been pretty, Cynthia would have filled the position of mother with a better grace. But poor little Nannie Chauncery possessed none of those picturesque elements that make even fashionable mothers tolerant to their offspring. Physically she resembled her father in being thick-set, sturdy, direct-eyed. Honest, straightforward, and without subterfuge, she was also his mental counterpart.

It was the children's era, when for a season, in public at least, bairns ousted pet-dogs from their mistresses' laps, and, usurping the place of toy gryphons and poodles, were taken airings in the Park. Then it was that Nannie Chauncery, rigged out in artistic garb that, whether elaborately picturesque or severely simple, never seemed quite in keeping with her contours, became for a space a prominent factor in her mother's life. Unfortunately for herself Nannie wanted the adaptability that enabled certain other children to pose in company—lacked the intuition that might have enabled her to assume a fictitiously accustomed air when meeting with unaccustomed caresses.

When Cynthia threw an arm round her little daughter, Nannie's sturdy young form kept stiffly

upright. It did not lean confidently towards her mother.

"Go away! You stiff little thing," Cynthia had once said, ringing the bell in a pet, on the retreat of a visitor whom she had desired to impress with her maternal devotion. "Take Miss Nannie upstairs to Nurse. She has not behaved prettily."

And poor Nannie, her heart burning under a sense of injustice, was ruthlessly relegated to the nursery, there to wear out her nurse's patience in vain inquiries as to what she had done that was naughty. It did not occur to her bewildered little brain that her sin had been that of omission, not of commission. How could she guess that if she had only said "Mother, dearest," and nestled affectionately within Cynthia's embracing arm, she would not have been deported in disgrace?

In spite of the perfection which the art of modern photography has reached, the picture taken expressly for publication in the "Lovely Mothers and Lovely Children" series appearing in a popular ladies' journal represented Nannie in so unfavourable a light that Cynthia thought seriously of suppressing it.

"Good Heavens! What sin have I committed that Providence should saddle me with such an appallingly *bourgeoise* child?" she demanded. "Though Nannie had been born and brought up in a ploughman's cottage she could not look commoner."

It was ridiculous, Mrs. Chauncery assured herself, to have nurseries and keep nursemaids, and then, later, to incur the expense and bother of a school-room and a governess for only one child. The



sensible thing would be to send Nannie to boarding-school.

Tom Chauncery loved his little daughter; and though Cynthia was a mistress of sophistry, all her powers of argument did not avail until she brought forward as justification the loneliness of an only child.

That plea proved unanswerable. A good boarding-school on the south coast was found; and Nannie, scarcely more than a baby, was sent into exile. The disused nurseries were swept and garnished, and, with a pleasing sense of lightened responsibilities, Cynthia went on her way unencumbered by the carking cares of maternity.

"You see there is no room for a child in this house," she would say in exculpation, when some more tender-hearted matron voiced her surprise at the banishment of so young a child. "Tom is a busy man, and as for me I never have a spare moment. I always say I work sixteen hours a day, and it's really no exaggeration. It breaks my heart to part with Nannie, of course," she might add in consideration of her friend's prejudices, "but what is one to do? An only child is an incessant care, and when one is at the mercy of hired females one is so helpless."

So in alien, though kindly, hands little Nannie Chauncery had grown up to maidenhood from a perplexed infancy, full of vague, scarcely understood yearnings; longings that were merely her natural craving to be mothered, to nestle her head close to a loving heart, to be petted and teased and sympathized with, as a mother of Cynthia Chauncery's calibre never could.

It cut Tom Chauncery to the quick to discover how soon the dimpled baby, to whose nursery he had paid so many surreptitious visits, had developed into a gawky schoolgirl of sixteen. These lost years, he knew, could never be regained. He felt as though he had voluntarily permitted himself to be robbed of a large portion of his daughter's childhood. Perhaps it was this consciousness that lay at the root of his desire to see much of Nannie during the school holidays, that in his wife's opinion were too frequent and too prolonged.

It was a happy and heedless trio who sat down to dinner in Frances's sitting-room that night. Mrs. Lett shared the belief common to coast landladies, that while a female lodger can and ought to be content to take her principal meal early, no male being can subsist without a substantial late dinner.

Frances's sitting-room bore a gala aspect to greet her guests. Sir Alan Grant's portrait, from the master-hand of Sir George Reid, held the position once occupied by the gimcrack overmantel, his writing-table stood near the window. A "baby" grand piano, his last gift, daintily filled the space once occupied by the cumbrous chiffonnier. The irritating ornaments had given place to a few good curiosities. The white lace curtains had been withdrawn in favour of rich foreign draperies.

With her treasured belongings around her, and her own friends seated at her table, Frances for the first time felt that her little coast lodging had attained to the full dignity of a home.

The succeeding three days were passed in that glorious state of utter disregard of appearances only

to be enjoyed in a place where one knows nobody. They stuck their heads out of the windows of their adjacent houses and conversed before breakfast. Bought lobsters and salad for luncheon, and creamy cakes for tea, and carried them home in paper bags. Wandered hither and thither. Climbed cliffs and explored chines, walked to far-away bays, and picnicked on their shores on sandwiches and bananas and squashy pastry. Went primrose-hunting in the woods. Scraped, with lamentable lack of success, amongst the shingle for the agates that the guide-book declared were to be found on the beaches. Crammed into a few days pleasures that, thinly spread, would have covered weeks.

It was on Easter Sunday that a chance encounter robbed their enjoyments of their free and easy nature.

They had gone to church in deference to the wish of Frances, who felt as though she had no right to be so happy without publicly returning thanks ; and adverse though amicable Fate in the form of Admiral Wyon, recognizing in Tom Chauncery the son of an old friend, shadowed the party as they left the building, and claimed acquaintance.

The ice that protected Budcombe society once broken, the interior it had covered was found to be warm and genial. Before they parted company, Chauncery had promised to meet the Admiral in the morning for the purpose of being shown over the club that was his pet hobby ; and they had all three engaged to take tea with him on the following afternoon, to meet certain of his townsfolk.

" It's all over now," Nannie Chauncery declared, regarding the future with the dismal foreboding of

youth. "We won't have a minute to ourselves again. If father goes to the club, and we go to tea, that will waste the whole day; and father gets back to London on Wednesday morning. We were so happy here while we knew nobody. We could go about anyhow, and do just as we liked. *Now* father must button the belt of his Norfolk jacket, and put his cap on straight."

"Yes. It's very kind of Admiral Wyon, but I'm afraid the holiday is over," Frances sadly acquiesced. "We must sit up and look pretty now."

"Well, I've got a backbone of sorts. I can sit up at least," Chauncery agreed. "The other requirement, I fear, is beyond me!"

Despite their ungracious repining, Admiral Wyon's tea-party proved quite a pleasant little introduction to Budcombe society. The Sedges were there, and Janey was charmed to make authorized acquaintance with Frances, whom in her secret heart she regarded as the living embodiment of her most adored fictional heroines. As a means of getting to know Frances better, she struck up an instant friendship with Nannie. And Major Sedge insisted upon Tom Chauncery making use of his golf clubs, and accompanying him on a round of the golf course next morning.

Mrs. Penderby, who had just returned from Bath, hailed Frances as an old friend; and, true to the hospitable traditions of the town, invited them all to an impromptu croquet party on the following afternoon.

It was Tuesday evening. Mrs. Penderby's croquet party had dispersed, and Frances and the Chauncerys,

accompanied by Janey Sedge, who had promised to show Nannie the nook on the landslide where the primroses grew thickest, had wandered up the cliff to the flagstaff. The distance that on her first coming to Devonshire Frances had thought so formidable was easily overtaken now.

Seating themselves on the grassy slope that graced the highest point, Tom and she paused to watch the sunset.

It was a calm evening. In the west the sun was sinking in a glory of crimson and purple and gold. Under its radiance the whole land appeared transfigured. The far-spreading surface of the water was tinged with roseate colour. Even the green tumbled slopes of the landslide had gained a fresh beauty. As Frances said, with a contented sigh, it was as though they were looking through rose-coloured spectacles.

"Oh, by the way, Fanny, I've solved the mystery of our hostess's dual husband. Sedge told me he wasn't a Jekyll and Hyde monstrosity as you imagined. He was actually two distinct men. Mrs. Penderby was married twice. It is her unfortunate habit of referring to them both indiscriminately as 'my husband' that leads to confusion in the minds of those who, like yourself, try to adjust the doings of the sportive first husband to the blameless entity of the reverend second!"

"I guessed that this afternoon. The lady in the brown velvet dress told me she had known Mrs. Penderby in India, when her first husband was alive."

Frances spoke absently. Ear on the morrow

Chauncery would journey back to town. But though she was painfully conscious that this was her last opportunity of a confidential word with him, and though the subject that during the past few days they had tacitly avoided loomed large between them, she shrank from giving her thoughts utterance.

The sun was nearly out of sight ; the glow was already fading. In a minute more they must summon the young girls and hasten homewards, but still she found herself able to converse on any subject save the one she had at heart.

Probably Tom was experiencing a like difficulty, for under his guidance the talk circled round Biarritz. Touching now upon Cynthia, then referring to Ellaline Bister, the while both were thinking of Trent. Frances longed to tell Tom that she had resolutely thrust all thought of her mercenary lover out of her heart, but lacked the courage to introduce his name. And on his part Chauncery wished to prepare her for news of Trent's secession.

" Cynthia writes that Trent says Miss Bister has a beautiful soul," he remarked at last, apropos of nothing, as he sedulously cleared his pipe-stem with a stiff stem of grass.

Frances was silent a moment. Her eyes were fixed upon the headlands dimly seen beyond the shimmering sea. Perhaps her heart was not yet so entirely empty of Mason Trent as she schooled herself to believe. Then she spoke bravely.

" Tom—don't be afraid to tell me—does Cynthia think Mason is likely to marry Miss Bister ? "

" Well—she seems to be hinting that way," Chauncery made judicious acknowledgment. " In-

deed I think it's likely they may come back engaged."

For a long minute there was silence. Then Tom put out a cousinly hand, and gently patted her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, Fan. He's not worth worrying about. I can assure you of that. There's nothing beautiful about Trent's soul. It's a poor skinny little specimen."

"I'm not going to worry, Tom." She turned sincere blue eyes upon him. "Whenever I found he was not the man I had imagined him, I tried not to care for him any more."

"Good girl. But—Great Powers!—imagine a punctilious being like Trent spending the rest of his life hauling *that* round!"

"'That' won't require hauling round, Tom." There was a hint of bitterness in her tone. "He will drive 'that' round in the smartest electric landaulette procurable."

"But how, after caring for you, any man could tolerate that muling and puking——"

"You forget, Tom." Frances had risen and was brushing the dried grass off her skirt as she spoke. "Even in my palmiest days I was a beggarmaid in comparison with Miss Bister."

## CHAPTER XVII

### CYNTHIA AIRS A GRIEVANCE

**A**T the close of a blithesome vacation Nannie Chauncery returned reluctantly to her Bournemouth boarding-school, and Frances settled down to enjoy the simple gaiety of the little town, where life's chief labour lay in play.

Once Budcombe society had realized that it might with impunity receive Frances, it welcomed her to its innermost heart. Charming and unconventional people naturally gravitated to Budcombe, but it was rarely that anyone so young as she voluntarily took up her abode there. And as, by some kind disposition of Providence, even the oldest amongst us *feels* young, and as even the most sensible of us shares the happy faculty of forgetting how old—counting by the clumsy and wholly inadequate method of measuring by years—we really are, most of her new acquaintances esteemed Frances a fit companion for themselves, and invited her to share their varied forms of enjoyment.

The subscriptions to the local societies being wisely calculated to meet the limits of a modest purse, Frances joined the Ladies' Golf Club, was unanimously elected a member of the Budcombe Shakespeare Society, and was urged to join the local sketching club, though any attempts she had made



in Art were glaringly amateur. And if the fact that she had no singing voice had not provided Frances with a plausible excuse she might have been forcibly included in the Budcombe Choral Union.

The sympathetic nature that enabled Frances to enter so fully into the interests of others, made her a delightful and much-sought-after companion. Its residents being possessed of infinite leisure, Budcombe was a hot-bed of pleasant hobbies ; and Frances, having no rival bent of her own, was able to take an unprejudiced interest in those of the others.

The Devon world of spring and early summer is a world of daily increasing beauty and fragrance, and Frances spent few of the hours indoors. She went botanizing with the Ladrams, rejoicing to meet familiar flower friends, and feeling the excitement of the discoverer when she made acquaintance with florets new to her, such as the little green-blossomed moschatel, the delicate marsh-violet, or the rarer double variety of the lady's smock, with its tiny lavender roses.

Throughout the summer she kept her vases filled with wild flowers, finding great pleasure in devising odd combinations of blossoms and foliage, uniting the gold of marsh-marigold with black-berried ivy : the greeny-yellow of spurge, or the feathery white of wood-sanicle, with the rich blue of wild hyacinth.

When Admiral Wyon desired to enrol her as assistant in his favourite pursuit of entomology, she refused to attempt the capture of butterflies, but shared, with intelligence if not always with enthusiasm, in the laborious search on the various plants for the eggs that had been deposited.

When energetic Mrs. Dover and her boys scrambled over the far-reaching ledge of rock at low tide in quest of specimens to fill their salt-water aquarium, Frances had a glorious morning, and ruined a pair of shoes accompanying them. When Miss Halford went agate-hunting, Frances, whom she had invited to go with her, spent two hours in a recumbent position scraping amongst the gravel with a bit of wood, quite satisfied if once in a while she chanced upon something worthy to be classed as a quartz gem.

Experience of life in this cheerful community opened Frances's eyes to many things. It showed her that content assuredly did not lie in the abundance of possessions, that actual wealth accounted but little for happiness. Her small income not only permitted her to live in comfort, it even enabled her to show a return of hospitality. For at Budcombe, as she discovered, one lady can invite another to tea, and, without danger of loss of dignity, provide for her entertainment nothing more lavish than a couple of toasted halfpenny buns.

During her first summer in Devon it must be confessed that Frances clung desperately to active employment. Mason Trent's marriage with Ellaline Bister was rapidly approaching, and although she believed her wound to be healed she did not care to allow herself too much leisure for retrospection. As Tom Chauncery had predicted, they had returned from Biarritz engaged, and the wedding was fixed to take place early in July. Cynthia wrote in high spirits about it. To judge from the lack of reticence in her communications, she had already for-

gotten about Trent's recent supposed attachment to Frances, and so kept her cousin fully informed respecting the plans for the approaching union. In the character of the bride's bosom friend and intimate adviser, Mrs. Chauncery was conversant with all details of the arrangements. The reception after the ceremony was to take place at the Chauncerys' house at Half-Down Street, and Nannie was to be recalled temporarily from school to act as one of the bridesmaids.

The day of the wedding found Frances with a friendly golf match to play in the morning, a tennis tea in the afternoon, and a bridge engagement for night. Determined not to allow herself to remember the special significance of the date, Frances threw herself into these amusements with apparent enthusiasm. To outward seeming she was engrossed in the game, yet her golf partner, on receiving a preoccupied and quite incoherent reply to a remark, glanced questioningly at her, and made the discovery that, wherever Miss Grant's thoughts might be, they were not on that cliff-top golf-course.

She had exerted herself so unsparingly all day that when at last she went to bed she fell into the sleep of utter exhaustion. Next morning, though she knew that the marriage-day was past, hope was still lingering. Somehow, so long as she did not officially know that the marriage was an accomplished fact, she could not believe that it had really taken place. She believed her love for Trent to have been conquered, utterly routed by his cavalier treatment of her. Yet it would not have surprised her had she seen him walk up the little gravelled path by the

anonymous hedge, and heard him say that at the last his heart had refused to let him marry Miss Bister.

The arrival, at noon, of the London papers dispelled any lingering illusion on the subject. Purchasing a *Daily Graphic* at the library, which was also a newspaper and stationery emporium, Frances walked back along the Parade carrying the journal unopened in her hand.

Though it was early in the Budcombe season, the sea-front already bore sign of the annual incursion of visitors. On the seats ladies, protected from the sun by parasols, sat and gossiped. Children, poised delicately on unaccustomed bare feet, threw stones into the sea. Down by the gaily-striped bathing machines half a dozen rudimentary-looking bathing-costumes and a corresponding number of towels were spread on the cobbles to dry.

Save for a black-bonneted nurse, who mechanically joggled a perambulator with her foot while she avidly devoured a novelette, the thatched shelter was empty. Entering its cool shade, Frances seated herself on the wooden bench and opened the paper.

The first glance gave her the news she did not seek. The portraits of the newly married pair stared at her from the page bearing an account of the fashionable weddings of the previous day : Ellaline with a weak simper on her indefinite features, her tightly crimped drab hair drawn with torturing severity back from her too prominent forehead, and the showy necklace that looked incongruous on her angular throat. Opposite to her Mason Trent, his hair parted with mathematical exactitude, his collar that was neither a shade too high nor too low, his tie that was the correct

thing in neck-wear, wore his stereotyped expression of courteous gravity. To have condescended to smile while under the hands of the photographer he would have considered being over-familiar with one in an inferior social position.

So the matter was irrevocably decided. Trent had done what, in spite of his treatment of herself, Frances had believed him incapable of doing. He had married for money—or, to be strictly just, not so much for money as for the worldly advancement money might bring.

A pretence of luncheon taken, Frances hastened out, while Budcombe was still indoors partaking of its midday meal, to hide herself in the sanctuary of the woods. It was the afternoon when, throughout the summer months, the members of the sketch club went on their fortnightly sketching expedition. Frances, who painted in water-colours (atrociously, but with a will), had enjoyed the previous excursions. To-day the savour had gone out of life. The light-hearted gaiety of the others would have jarred upon her over-strung nerves.

The woods within walking distance of Budcombe were many. There was the noble pine-forest, with its undergrowth of gorgeously flowering rhododendrons, and its russet carpet of pine-needles that in autumn was buried deep in many-tinted bracken. And the tiny larch coppice by the old gravel-pit, where, sitting within the gauzy screen of down-dropping foliage, one could watch the rabbits play amongst the foxglove and wasp-beloved figwort that clothed the lower slopes of the deserted hollow.

But the wood Frances sought to-day was farther

afield than either. She loved it because it was what she called a "real wood." It owned that medley of trees and shrubs and flowering plants that go to the making of the loveliest wood of all. In spring, when sharp winds blew athwart the sun's rays, it had a way of rigorously excluding the wind while it tenderly prisoned the sunshine in meshes fashioned of the budding twigs. There the nesting birds sang joyous carol, and primroses and yellow wood-strife covered the grove. And down in the hollow, where earlier still she had found the wild daffodils, marsh-marigolds had bloomed profusely.

Frances had always been happy in the "real wood." The fact that she had never seen any one there had given her a feeling of semi-proprietorial right to it. She had almost come to think of it as her own. To-day even the pretence of ownership was untenable. The sight of two bicycles propped against the hedge-bank just within the entrance to the wood gave warning that others had been before her. And, though she hastened to a part of the glade unlikely to be reached by the casual adventurer, the precious feeling of aloofness had gone.

The summer wood too had lost the joyous rapture of springing verdure, of singing bird, and was dark, silent, depressing. The birds, whose artless gaiety had made the air vocal with rejoicing, were dumb. The primrose plants that earlier were cushions of fragrant bloom had degenerated into clumps of coarse green leaves.

Frances wandered about desolately for a while. Then suddenly realizing that she was tired, and that home was a long distance away, she set off drearily to walk back to Budcombe.

The high road was hot and dusty, a heavy heart made the road long. As she approached her lodgings, dragging listless limbs up the path, the juvenile maid, who had evidently been on the watch, propelled herself like a short-haired, long-aproned projectile shot from some catapult out of the side door.

"There's a lady come, Miss; a fine lady from London. She's a-sittin' in your room, Miss. An' me an' Missis, we've took her up tea."

"It is Cynthia," Frances opined, with a lamentable lack of the pleasant anticipation where-with a rightly constituted maiden ought to have welcomed news of the unexpected arrival of her only near relative. And Cynthia it proved to be.

A chronic discontent made Mrs. Chauncery a gad-about. She could hardly spend a week at home without imagining she would have been more comfortable elsewhere. London was ever either too hot or too cold, too damp or too dusty, for her. The fact that she had promptly escorted Nannie back to school to finish her term provided Cynthia with an excuse for journeying a little farther west to Budcombe. Though, as Frances shrewdly guessed, this was not so much from a desire to visit her cousin, as to disburden her mind of a detailed account of the Trent-Bister wedding.

Mrs. Chauncery was an experienced traveller. She knew how to make herself at home. When Frances entered her little sitting-room she found Cynthia comfortably ensconced on the sofa, propped up by all the available cushions. Frances's best slippers were on her feet, one of Frances's handkerchiefs soaked in Frances's eau-de-cologne lay on her

forehead. But although Mrs. Chauncery's attitude denoted extreme exhaustion, the depleted state of the tea-tray showed that she had not been too overcome to take substantial refreshment.

Though Frances Grant had a sweet disposition, she was merely human. She would hardly have been willing to confess it, yet it afforded her a species of hollow consolation to find that Cynthia's view of the recent union was wholly condemnatory.

In some mysterious way Mrs. Chauncery's opinion of one who so lately was her inseparable companion had completely changed.

"Ellaline Bister looked simply appalling at the wedding!" she exclaimed, after the first greetings had been exchanged, plunging without loss of time into the subject next her heart. "Of course she never was, and never will be, anything but plain; but I never saw a bride look so gratuitously *ugly*. You can imagine any one with her complexion in white. But the appalling thing was that she had *hay fever*, and sniffed all through the ceremony! It appears that she takes *hay fever every summer*, and that it lasts *six weeks*! You should have seen Mason's face when she bleated out that pleasant piece of information, as though it were something to be proud of! He tried hard to sustain his sympathetic expression, but I could see him wince. I really felt quite sorry for him. Fancy Mason Trent with a wife who has *hay fever* all through the London season! What a ghastly dispensation! If he had known in time, I'm certain he'd have crawled out of the engagement somehow. But it's too late now. Poor Mason!"



"Poor Mason!" Frances echoed her cousin's words mechanically.

"There's another thing too. . . . I can't help thinking that now that she has secured him, Ellaline will keep a firm hold of the purse-strings. Old Bister must have been a sharp one. It was only when they came to the question of settlements that Mason learned that by the terms of her father's will every penny of Ellaline's fortune had been secured to herself!"

"But she has plenty in any case—hasn't she?"

"Oh, her income is *huge*, of course," Mrs. Chauncery assented testily. "But the point is—will she spend it? While we were away in spring she was all right—never seemed to think of money. But after Mason had proposed, and we came back to London, she turned abominably stingy. She would have me help her to select her trousseau, and really, sometimes I felt quite humiliated, she seemed so unwilling to buy the best quality of anything. Always kept asking if they hadn't something that would look the same, and be less expensive."

"Some people enjoy little economies," Frances made mollifying reply. "And if she is mean only to herself, it won't matter so much. Will it?"

"But that's the worst of it," Cynthia responded, eagerly seizing the opportunity of airing a personal grievance. "There's something I must tell you—in strict confidence, of course—that will open your eyes as it did mine. I had suspected Ellaline Bister of being mean, and this proved it. You know all I did for her—how I introduced Mason to her, and took her to Biarritz, and had the wedding-reception in our house and everything? Well!

Ellaline was always making a fuss and professing to be awfully indebted to me, and saying she must give me something nice as a souvenir of the event. And when the present did at last appear, what do you think it was ? ”

Leaning back amongst the sofa cushions, Mrs. Chauncery regarded her cousin with the confident expression of one who has just expounded a riddle of which she alone holds the key.

“ It was a *chatelaine* ! ” she made triumphant announcement, when Frances had indicated her inability to guess. “ A silver chatelaine—of all the out-of-date, last century trinkets ! And it wasn’t even a new one. ” Mrs. Chauncery not only looked a gift horse in the mouth, she went the length of descanting volubly on the number, size and general deficiencies of his teeth. “ She must have had it for years and years (if it hadn’t been her mother’s), for one of the links had been worn through, and she had to get it *mended* before giving it to me. ”

“ Never ! ” Frances ejaculated incredulously. There are certain things it is difficult to believe, even about a successful rival. That was one of them.

“ It’s a positive fact, I assure you, my dear. Her maid told mine. I nearly refused to take it. It was only for the sake of appearances, and for Mason’s sake, too, that I accepted it. But of course I shall never wear it. I gave it to Nannie. She wanted a present to give to her German governess who is leaving school to be married. It may be of use to her. But, Fan, tell me—did you ever in your whole life hear anything so appallingly stingy ? Still—as I said to Tom—what else can you expect of a rich woman who wears *cleaned gloves* ? ”

## CHAPTER XVII

### MR. LETT'S WALKING-STICK

**A** PECULIAR—and not officially recognized—species of consolation, soothing if hollow, lurks in the misfortunes of our faithless friends. Even a generous nature like that of Frances Grant experienced a secret gratification in the knowledge that, in abandoning her, Trent had made a change not entirely for the better, and one that he might possibly have reason to regret.

Cynthia's flying visit had decidedly helped to solace Frances's wounded pride. In her forthcoming visions of Trent's honeymoon bliss, the fact that she saw his happiness discounted by the presence of a red-eyed, sneezing bride, considerably lessened the painful heart-ache that previous thought of his probable rapture had engendered.

Mrs. Chauncery returned to town next day. Having unburdened her mind of her grievance against Mrs. Mason Trent, Cynthia had speedily recollected a dozen important engagements, any one of which would have been sufficient reason for her journeying back to London. And with lightened heart Frances took up anew the threads of her daily life.

The untoward events that had opened her mind to a true estimate of Trent's character by destroying her trust had, though she did not suspect it, actually killed

her love for him. What she had recently imagined the pangs of wounded love had really been the smarting of bruised vanity, and Cynthia's revelations had turned the smart into a comfortable sensation of pity, one that was easy and almost pleasant to endure.

As the long lovely Devon summer wore on, Frances, from the Chauncerys' letters, gleaned stray items of news regarding the doings of the newly-married pair.

The honeymoon had been curtailed, owing to Mrs. Trent finding that the country house, lent them for the happy occasion, being on a clay soil, did not suit her constitution. So they had returned to town; although, as her big gloomy house in Hartmann Square was still in the leaden hands of decorators, Mrs. Trent had suffered severely from draughts, and noise, and the smell of paint, before she could decide where next to go.

The fact that Cynthia had affected to despise her former friend seemed to have made no difference in their terms of intimacy. The two households appeared to be in frequent communication. It was the knowledge that the Trents were booked to spend some weeks at the riverside house the Chauncerys had taken for August and September that made Frances decline to join the house-party. Though sometimes on the hot August days when Budcombe lay grilling in the sun, and the little Parade echoed to the feet of what the townfolk called the "bathers"; when the half-dozen bathing-machines were in constant demand, and between the hours of eleven and one a brisk trade was done

on the beach in the hire of folding chairs, Frances thought longingly of cool hours spent in leafy backwaters.

It was in August that certain of the wealthier and consequently the more conservative residents of Budcombe, in protest against the invasion of visitors, shut up their dwellings and fled across the Channel. Others, less independent, found the means for travel by temporarily relinquishing their houses—for a monetary consideration—to the invaders.

And the remainder, who like Frances lived in apartments, like her remained on, and remarked to each other how pleasant it was that such a nice class of visitors came to Budcombe, and congratulated themselves that the distance from London kept the place so delightfully free from the tripper element.

Mrs. Penderby was staying with former parishioners in Oxfordshire. Admiral Wyon was absent yachting. The Sedges were in Switzerland. But plenty of pleasant people remained, and many little expeditions Frances shared in congenial company; sometimes voyaging on one of the excursion steamers that, plying along the coast, made periodic trips to points of interest, east or west of Budcombe. Steamers that, in the total absence of anything in the nature of a pier, used to ship passengers by running—in what appeared a suicidal fashion—right on to the beach, and embarking intending travellers by a gangway projected from the bow. Or they went driving inland to the heather covered moors, where in moist spots cotton-grass and bog-asphodel grew, and where one exciting day Frances narrowly escaped treading on an adder;

and whence she brought a noble plant of sundew, that flourished for some weeks under a bell-glass on her window-still, subsisting on a diet of greenfly shaken from blighted rose-sprays.

September, with its blackberry-picking rambles, and October, with the alluring occupation of nutting in the woods, had come and gone. When one morning Frances awoke to the understanding that November was well begun, she felt as though Time had stolen a march upon her, and that without her catching a hint of his approach winter had crept close.

The summer visitors had long ago returned to town. With their departure the bathing-machines had been trundled off the beach, and were snugly housed till the demands of another season would recall their dormant existence. And Mrs. Penderby's gardener—who, being a Scotsman, had never quite overcome his distrust of Devon weather—had the sacking overcoats of the palms at hand, ready to slip on at the merest suggestion of frost.

The Budcombe residents, with the exception of Mr. Elpick and his sisters, who always wintered in Algiers, had settled down to enjoy a cosy winter by their own firesides, and with the courage of a forlorn hope the windows of the houses along the little Parade exhibited more or less fly-blown announcements of "Apartments to let".

It was with something of surprise that one morning Frances saw a male stranger entering the adjacent house, and learnt from Mrs. Lett that a gentlemen had taken for an indefinite period the rooms previously occupied by Tom and Nannie Chauncery.

It was impossible for a frail mortal to live so close to a personable stranger and not to feel an interest in him. Half unconsciously, Frances began to notice his comings and goings. She could hardly avoid hearing bits of gossip, which drifted by way of his landlady and through hers, regarding the visitor's mode of life.

How he left the catering entirely to Miss Mithen and (later) never looked at a bill. How, when Miss Mithen had asked what kind of fish he preferred she had received the astounding reply—"Any kind of fish you like, so long as it has no bones!" How Miss Mithen was sure he must be a literary gentleman, for he spent most of his time writing. How, although he was alone and had no visitors, he had taken four rooms, one to eat in, one to sit in, one to sleep in, and another to dress in.

That his habits were regular Frances saw without being told. Each morning as she sat at breakfast by the window overlooking the sea, she noticed him pass down the path bordering the next door lawn, and walk briskly up and down the Parade smoking a pipe, for half an hour to the minute. Early every afternoon a horse was brought round from the livery stables, and he went riding. After dinner she sometimes caught sight of the red glow of his cigar as he strolled up and down the Parade.

He was always alone, and appeared to have no acquaintance with any one in Budcombe. And half unconsciously Frances felt her interest in him increase, principally because he was lonely, as she had been during the early months of her stay

in the town. She felt almost tempted to tell him that, if he had patience to wait a little, he would know everybody, and would find them all delightful. Another thing that aroused her ready sympathy was a suspicion that his literary work was a trouble to him. Miss Mithen had an account of a day when, taking in a message at eleven o'clock, she had found him seated with only two lines written on the paper before him. And entering more than two hours later to see why he ignored the summons to luncheon, she had found him sitting staring blankly at the paper, to which he had not yet added a third line, though his waste-paper basket was half filled with scrawls he had torn up!

But when not actually at work, he kept his papers carefully locked away; the nature of his literary labour was something of a mystery. From painstaking scrutiny of the fragments of destroyed script Miss Mithen shrewdly guessed that her lodger was engaged upon a military romance, though owing to defective eyesight and the illegible style of the author's caligraphy she succeeded in gathering little more than that the scene was laid in the East, and that there was fighting in it.

But for a certain distinctive alertness of bearing, the subject of these conjectures might have been described as of ordinary appearance. A slim wiry figure lent him an air of youth, though he was probably over forty. He had close-cropped fair hair, and a moustache that looked still fairer by contrast with his tanned skin. He was always well and appropriately clad. His dress exhibited none of the peculiarities that Frances—to whom the literary



world was an unknown sphere—expected to find in one of his calling.

One glorious cloudless day in the week preceding Christmas—a day borrowed from the coming summer, and one that, after his knavish fashion, winter would repay with a day of chill and rain—Frances set forth to gather holly for the seasonable decoration of her rooms. Provided with a length of string and a stout stick with a crook handle (a relic of the late Mr. Lett), she walked briskly inland between the high hedge banks that were still verdant with the evergreen polypod fern, and bright with many-tinted bracken.

The berried shrubs near Budcombe had early been despoiled of their treasure, but Frances was not dependent upon them. Two miles away, high up on the West Budcombe road, she had noticed a clump of many-berried holly, and had secretly marked it for her own.

The road was dry, the sunshine invigorating, and Frances was in that pleasantly complacent frame of mind that best conduces to the enjoyment of a solitary walk. Reaching her treasure-trove she found it intact and quite as heavily laden with the shining scarlet fruit as her memory had pictured it.

The branches were high, but with the aid of the stick she managed to bend them down so that she might strip off the sprays she coveted. Emboldened by success, she became yet more daring, and was in the act of securing a still higher cluster, when the smooth stick slipped from her grasp, and, caught up by the spring of the branch, hung suspended among the boughs overhead.

For a moment Frances did not know whether to laugh or to cry. It seemed such a futile end to her quest to be obliged to return with little more than a third of the foliage she required. And worse than all would it be to leave Mr. Lett's stick dangling from the branches just where the first van-man, driving by, could see and secure it. Did she hasten back to Budcombe for help to dislodge it, Frances knew that the early winter dusk would have fallen before she could return.

At first she sought to secure the stick by hitting wildly at it with a broken bough, but so firmly was it fixed that her most forcible efforts failed to move it. Any attempts at a nearer approach by scaling the hedge-bank also proved useless.

Frances had reached despairing point, when a sound of hoof-beats fell gratefully on her ears. A horseman was coming up the road at a quick trot.

Springing up from the gnarled root on which she had sat down to consider a new plan of action, Frances stood with arm outstretched to attract the attention of the rider.

On that lonely road she had expected to see some mounted errand-boy, or farm-labourer. To her embarrassment the equestrian proved to be her literary neighbour, taking his afternoon ride. Had he not already noticed her signal, Frances would have shrunk back into the shadow of the hedge and let him pass, trusting to intercept some later comer. But the rider had drawn up and, with lifted cap, was waiting to learn her wishes.

" Oh—I am so sorry to trouble you—I was picking

holly and my stick slipped. Do you think you could get it for me? If you wouldn't mind." With pointing finger she indicated the late Mr. Lett's Sunday staff dangling, Absalom-like, from the high branch.

Guiding his horse till it stood under the holly-tree, the rider easily unhooked the walking-stick and handed it to Frances.

"Oh, thank you so very much. I was picking holly for Christmas decorations, and tried to pull down too high a branch. I shall be less ambitious another time," Frances explained as she received it.

"But have you got what you require? The only good sprays seem to be on top. Can I not help to bend down the branches? See!"

Reaching up he fixed the handle of his hunting crop in the boughs, and in a few minutes Frances stood knee-deep amid the garnered greenery.

"Oh, that is quite enough, thank you! What lovely berries! Oh, no more, *please*, or I shan't be able to carry them home."

"Yes—how were you going to get them home? Is there a carriage coming?" the stranger asked, looking down at Frances as she stood, her cheeks aglow with the exertion, her blue eyes sparkling, a strand of her hair, torn loose by some recalcitrant bough, caressing her cheek.

At his question Frances shook her head.

"No. I meant to carry the holly home myself. It is quite light, and the way is down hill. But there is such a splendid lot here, that I'm afraid I can only take half at a time. I have plenty of

string," she explained, noticing the rider's doubtful expression, "and if I tie up the holly in two big bundles, I can hide one behind the hedge, and return to-morrow to fetch it."

Dismounting, the stranger was already busying himself with the scarlet-flecked greenery, binding the straggling bunches into compact portable bundles with the string.

"But you are getting your gloves spoilt," Frances made anxious expostulation. A pair of gloves was a pair of gloves to her now.

"What about your own?" the rider retorted with a smile, glancing as he spoke at the rubbed and scratched black suede that covered her hands.

"Oh, nothing can ever spoil these. They are very old ones. I put them on specially," Frances confessed.

Frances was tall for a woman, the stranger was of ordinary height for a man. For the first time in her life she had the conscious experience of conversing with a man whose eyes were exactly on a level with her own. As they met hers, his eyes she noticed were blue—not a soft luminous blue like her own, but a keen steely blue—eyes that would see far, and see clearly.

"It was good of you to help me," she said simply, when the two bundles, looking like Indian papooses in their string swathing, were tied up.

"Not at all. Not at all," the stranger protested hurriedly; and Frances was surprised to see that, now that the work was over, his manner had suddenly become constrained and ill at ease. Murmuring something about being glad if he had been of

service, he remounted and rode away ; and Frances, taking Mr. Lett's stick and her prickly holly papoose, set off briskly on her homeward journey, musing, as she went, on the subject of her late encounter.

It was quite evident, she decided, that though she seemed to know him so well, he had no idea that they were such near neighbours. The thought that, until their chance meeting, he had probably been totally unconscious of her existence, brought a nasty little shock to her vanity. She consoled herself with the idea that, being engrossed with his work, he had no thought to spare for anything outside it. It seemed curious that while she knew many personal and intimate details of his habits—such as, that he always slept with his windows wide open and that he owned a dozen pairs of boots all kept on boot-trees—he should not even guess that only a breast-high hedge separated their dwellings.

A literary man, as Frances knew from report, lives in a dream world. Most probably, as she assured herself, as an antidote against disappointment, he would not even know her again if they met. In spite of her dismal prognostications, there was quite a solid satisfaction in the conviction that, living in so small a town as Budcombe, they could not possibly avoid meeting !

Her neighbour was late in returning from his ride that afternoon. Frances could not help watching. It was nearly dark when she heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs on the road by the coast-guard station. Peeping cautiously round the edge of her curtain through the dusk, she saw him dismount, and heard the stable-boy, who, whistling discontentedly

to while away the tedium of waiting, had been hanging about the gate for an hour, lead off the horse.

As she watched the vague figure of the rider coming up the path, Frances discovered to her surprise that he carried a large bundle. As he neared the houses, she saw him pause, and, with a glance up at the casement behind which she was concealed, rest the bundle on the top of the hedge, and leaving it there, go indoors.

Even in the deceptive light there seemed something oddly familiar in the form of his burden. Delaying until she was certain he was well out of sight and hearing, Frances cautiously opened her window, and leaning out, peered over.

Her suspicion had been a correct one. It was her bundle of holly that rested on the flat top of the closely cropped hedge.

Her cheeks flaming at the notion that, after all, he had recognized her, that, in all probability he knew as much about her likes and dislikes as she did of his, Frances was cautiously withdrawing her head, when a glance to the side shewed her the stranger leaning out of his window, not a dozen feet distant.

By the light of the lamp streaming from the room behind she saw him clearly, and knew that he saw her.

“ You—you brought my holly ? ”

Frances was ashamed that she could originate no less blatant a remark with which to meet the embarrassing situation.

“ Yes—I—I brought it.”

His evident awkwardness lent Frances a little assurance.

"It was far too good of you to bother."

"Oh, not at all!"

"I'm afraid your horse must have found it rather a prickly burden?"

"Oh, not at all, I assure you."

"Oh—ah—good night," said Frances, by way of ending the halting conversation.

"Oh—ah—good night," replied her bashful neighbour.

"Well, I don't know what his books may be like," Frances thought, as with unnecessary sharpness she closed her window, "but a more diffident, tongue-tied, sheepish man I never met."

## CHAPTER XIX

### MISS MITHEN'S GENTLEMAN

**I**T was Christmas Eve. For the last week cheerful little Budcombe had shewn an increase of activity.

In and out of the post-office ladies bustled as though it were some giant beehive and they the busy bees—their pollen being represented by the non-descript parcels they carried in and deposited there.

The shops resplendent in coloured zig-zags and tinsel stars, had done a roaring trade. The piles of great iced cakes that earlier had made passers-by esteem the confectioner over-sanguine, had diminished so evidently as to arouse doubts as to his ability to serve the more tardy of his customers.

Children released from school had raided the country lanes, returning well pricked but triumphant, laden with trophy of greenery. But mistletoe was first favourite that season at Budcombe. A trio of blue-jackets, home on holiday, had set the fashion by lolling about the town each with a sprig tucked in his cap-band; and thereafter the mistletoe fever raged like a seasonable epidemic. Even the coast-guards had decorated the top of their flag-staff with a white berried cluster.

Frances was engaged to take luncheon at the Eyrie on Christmas-day.



"It is really an early dinner, my dear," Mrs. Penderby had explained. "Old Mrs. Gromwell and her sister, Miss Eaves, from West Budcombe, are coming. I always ask them. And as they don't like to be out after sunset we have the turkey and plum-pudding early. I'm dining with the Winleys at night, so it fits in nicely. We'll be very quiet, remember, so if you get an invitation that promises to be more lively you mustn't hesitate to throw me over."

But Frances accepted gladly and without reservation. Mrs. Penderby's had been the first Budcombe hand outstretched in welcome, and for nothing less than a Royal command would Frances decline even her humblest invitation.

The residents of Budcombe made festival in varied fashion. Admiral Wyon—a lonely man himself, since his wife's death ten years before—followed what had become his custom, of giving a dinner to those of his male friends whom he guessed were likely otherwise to pass the evening alone. Mrs. Lett had early sought and obtained Frances's permission to be absent on Christmas night, as her brother-in-law, the butcher at Huxmouth, was giving a "party."

"An' if you don't mind, Miss, I'll go over early and help to prepare. Gusta'll see about your dinner. I'll leave it all ready, just to hot up. She's handy enough when she likes."

Mrs. Lett's concluding statement was one that Frances felt inclined to discount, for the good lady's established comment upon the more pronounced peccadilloes of her handmaid was: "That

Gusta is the plague of my life ! What with the worry gettin' her up in the morning, and the cleaning up at her heels, and the things she breaks, and the food she eats, if it wasn't for the look of the thing I'd send her away and do the work myself !”

Miss Mithen and her brother had been invited to the butcher's party, but, as Frances had gathered from a conversation overheard across the hedge, Miss Mithen was obliged to deny herself the pleasure, as she had to stay at home to cook for her lodger, who was evidently going to pass Christmas in his customary solitary manner.

During the days succeeding their first interview, Frances and her neighbour had met, not once but many times, after the casual fashion of those whose abodes are separated by only a hedge. And the slight awkwardness attached to casual meetings between those whose acquaintance is on a purely accidental basis, and has no lawful social existence, impelled Frances to confine her comings and goings to the hours when she knew the Author, as she called him, would be engrossed with his writing or absent on his ride.

It was on the afternoon of the day preceding Christmas that Frances, entering the little back shop shelved round with the books that constituted the Budcombe Library, stumbled upon her neighbour. Hitherto their salutations had not ventured beyond bows, but in the narrow confines of the tiny book-lined room it was impossible to meet without speaking, and in surroundings so replete with interesting material for discussion speech readily extends into conversation.

On their comparing notes about books, Frances was surprised to find the Author so far behind in his reading as to be in a state of crass ignorance respecting the notable novels of even the year before last.

“I suppose you are like that other author—‘You don’t read books—you write them.’” Frances, making jesting remark, was amazed to see her companion turn red and, with a murmured scarce coherent excuse, seize the first volume that came to hand—it chanced to be the book he had brought to return—and beat a hasty retreat.

“Evidently the subject of his work is barred; but how stupid to be so absurdly sensitive; it makes conversation impossible,” she thought, as, crestfallen she went on mechanically looking round the shelves in search of something that appeared attractive. In common with most women, Frances shunned mediæval romance or philosophic disquisition, and clung to the modern story. Her ideal novel was that which did not shirk domestic detail, and whose action was compassed by the briefest possible span of years.

She was still feeling disconcerted, and half inclined to consider herself insulted, when Admiral Wyon entering, shoulders muffled in plaid, raindrops sparkling on his uncovered white hair, made a welcome diversion. With his appearance Frances’s momentary annoyance with her incomprehensible neighbour vanished, and solicitude for his loneliness resumed its sway. Seized by one of the ill-considered kindly impulses that so often beset her, she rushed without pausing to consider the advisability of her appeal, into a petition for the unknown.

"Oh, Admiral Wyon, I know how good you are to everybody. I wonder if you would take pity on a lonely stranger? It's the Author, I mean," she went on, answering her friend's puzzled expression. "He lives next door to me, and writes all day, except when he's out riding or walking, and he knows nobody."

There was no need for further explanation. In a place devoted to purely local interests news flies fast. While the stranger congratulated himself that in the quiet seaside town his identity was unguessed at and his presence unnoticed, all Budcombe was agog with the reflected glory of having an Author in its midst.

"The Author? Yes, I've noticed him. Rides well, too. What's his name?"

"Mr. Russell."

"Russell?" The Admiral was on the alert at once. "Why, if he's the man that writes the sea stories I'd enjoy a chat with him. There was a book of his I read once, rippin' good story too, but he made the——"

"Only I must warn you not to mention his books. If you do, he is so dreadfully sensitive on the subject that he'll lose the power of speech and run away! I know. I tried it."

"All right. I'll remember. Lots of clever men like that. Can't say I ever felt nervous myself. Handicaps a fellow to be so thin-skinned. Where's he living? Next door to you. Well, if you are going that way now, I'll step along with you and leave a card at once."

An hour later the Admiral, in a state of high

satisfaction, was ushered into Frances's sitting-room.

"Capital fellow, that. Modest. A gentleman. Been about a bit too. Just as you said, he seemed anxious to have no attention taken of his work. He was writing when I was shewn in, and he shut up his blotter at once, and didn't even refer to it. It seems he doesn't know anybody here, so I've asked him to dine with me to-morrow."

"Oh, that is good of you!" Frances exclaimed delightedly. "What did you and he talk about so long?"

Admiral Wyon frowned meditatively. "Well, now I come to think of it I must have done the most of the talking. Seems he has been a bit of a traveller, and we got chatting about the stations I'd been on."

The hospitable old Admiral had acted even beyond her most sanguine expectations. The dread of a lonely Christmas for her diffident neighbour totally dispelled, Frances went to bed that night with a feeling of peace on earth and good-will to all mankind radiating in her soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was nothing of the oft-pictured severity of the typical old English Christmas in the appearance of things next morning. The air was soft and moisture-laden. The grey of sea merged into the grey of sky without visible line of demarcation. The nearer distances were veiled. The murmur of the sea was faint, as though it lapped some distant beach.

Frances, conning over her mercies in a dutiful

Christmas spirit as she sat at breakfast, accounted the hap-hazard chance that had brought her to cosy friendly Budcombe not the least of them. She thought with a shudder of the Bloomsbury boarding-house, and felt glad that she had remembered to send the long-enduring manageress a little present. The fact that she had done so made her feel less selfish.

On the way to church she encountered Admiral Wyon hurrying down towards the Parade.

"Mustn't stop," he made passing reply to Frances's laughing comment on his hastening away from church. "Forgot to mention an hour for dinner to your Author. Running down now to apologize."

In church the air of hearty good-fellowship seemed accentuated. The decorations gave a glad-some appearance to the interior. The music breathed a more inspiring note. Everybody looked radiant. Little Ruby Sedge had by special permission brought her newest Santa Claus doll to service. Janey was beaming, in the warm atmosphere, under the burden of her first real set of furs.

When Admiral Wyon, entering late, took his accustomed place by the second pillar, Frances noticed that he did not seem to share in the general feeling of elation. His genial face was overcast. His voice was not heard in the responses with its customary heartiness. His was one of those buoyant natures that find it impossible to hide even a temporary depression, while a more reserved disposition conceals its perturbation as easily as it cloaks its joy. Noting the sudden dejection of her optimistic friend, Frances found conjectures as to whether her

neighbour had done or said anything to annoy the Admiral interfere with her attention to the service.

The church-door greetings over, Frances was turning to go home when she found Admiral Wyon at her side.

"Well? Did you see your man?" she asked, breaking a silence that, on his side, was ominous.

"No."

"Perhaps you left a note."

"No."

Observing that her companion was unwilling to speak until they were out of the hearing of the other members of the dispersing congregation, Frances kept silence. As they turned into the comparative retirement of the Parade, and the necessity for restraint was over, the Admiral let loose his bottled indignation.

"That man is a scoundrel!"

"Oh, surely not!" cried Frances, appalled, she hardly knew why.

"When you spoke of him to me, did you really know anything about him?"

"About him?" Frances asked, dismayed.

"About his being an author and all that. Did you?"

"No. I'm afraid I only knew what his landlady told mine. And that he was all alone and seemed to know no one here. Oh, I do hope there is nothing wrong?"

"I'm afraid there is." The Admiral's tone had an unwonted gravity. Glancing up at him, Frances saw that his ruddy colour had faded, that his complexion was streaky and dull. "If what I believe is true, the

man is one who has done me and mine a terrible injury."

Frances, longing for information, yet shrinking from appearing inquisitive, said nothing.

"It was ten—no, twelve—years ago that it happened. A young nephew of my wife's who was a subaltern in the 31st Hussars, got involved in a scandal: a grave scandal in which I have always believed that a senior officer named Russell was the real offender. The boy—he was only twenty—committed suicide. And the feeling against Russell was so strong that he was obliged to resign his commission. The poor boy had been a great favourite with my wife. The shock of his death really killed her, though she lived a year or two afterwards."

"Oh, how sad!" Frances murmured, with wet eyes. Her world was so bright, so full of interest, that the thought of a young life thus ignominiously shortened touched her acutely.

"But you don't really think this can be the same man?"

"I have proof of it—clear proof. There was no hesitation in the Admiral's pronouncement. "When I called on him this morning, the landlady, not knowing he had gone out, shewed me in, and went to fetch him. There was a book on military tactics lying on the table beside him. I opened it—there was his name and the number of the regiment. I wonder how he dared to confront me. How he dared to shew face within——"

"But he may not be the man! Russell is such a common name."

"But the number of the regiment was there.



And when I asked him to dine he made a lot of half excuses before he finally promised to come. The scoundrel! If I had only known."

"I'm sure there must be a mistake—dear Admiral Wyon—don't condemn him merely on a supposition. Wait until——"

But the Admiral was too occupied with his burning grievance to heed her pleading.

"How he would have dared to presume to enter my house!" he expostulated, as though the stranger had sought to thrust himself upon his hospitality.

Talking, they had passed Frances's lodging and were nearing the further end of the little deserted promenade. The morning mist had turned to a fine wetting rain, and there was no one about.

"I shall not rest till I have withdrawn the invitation and defied him to attempt to enter my house."

"Promise me you won't do anything till you know if he really is the man. I'm certain there is some dreadful mistake. Just think how awful it would be if after all he were not the—oh!"

Her supplication ended abruptly in a gasp, for as they reached the thatched shelter, they both saw, seated therein, quietly smoking and looking dreamily at the grey sea, the object of their discussion.

## CHAPTER XX

### ADMIRAL WYON'S TABOO

**W**HEN they caught sight of the man whose supposed demerits they were at the moment discussing, Frances, putting out a detaining hand, strove to hold the Admiral back. There was time for retreat, for, being seated on the side bend with his back turned towards the way of their approach, Russell had not seen them.

But Admiral Wyon was not the man to shirk what he esteemed a duty, however repellent its performance might have been to others. He was a born and bred fighter, and neither gave nor asked quarter. What he desired was to meet his enemy in face to face encounter. Striding into the little thatched shelter, he stood confronting his enemy, before that enemy was aware of his presence, and while he was absolutely oblivious of the fact that the Admiral cherished any feeling of antagonism.

Frances, torn between a conviction that she ought to go, and an overweening desire to remain, hesitated in the background, her proximity already forgotten by the Admiral, unguessed by the other.

"Admiral Wyon!" Russell exclaimed, rising with an expression of pleased surprise. "A merry Christmas to you, sir!"

The Admiral was in no mood for bandying com-

pliments. He rushed hot-haste upon the subject of his grievance.

"Before I return your good wishes, sir, may I inquire what claim you have to be considered an author?"

"None at all, I'm afraid. Not the very slightest, indeed."

The stranger had replied good-humouredly, turning astonished eyes upon his fiery interlocutor as though he half suspected a concealed witticism.

"Then how dare you come here, sir, masquerading as an author?"

There could no longer be any doubt of the Admiral's antagonism, but the stranger, sitting upright, answered him with courteous toleration.

"I confess I came for quiet to do some literary work. I assuredly never dreamt of posing as a literary man."

"Now that you have had the grace to acknowledge that your claim to authorship is a fraud"—the Admiral's voice held a note of triumph—"perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me if you were ever an officer in the 31st Hussars?"

Frances, a spell-bound spectator, who was experiencing to the full that sense of impotence with which a woman witnesses a difference between men, saw Russell flush and half smile, as though caught in some innocent deception.

"Well——" he appeared to hesitate.

"Answer me, sir. I demand it."

"Yes, I was. Though I don't——"

"And you left that regiment for reasons best known to yourself?"

As he played the part of inquisitor, the Admiral's sturdy figure seemed to expand by the power of his righteous wrath. His voice was vibrant with intensity of passion.

"I did."

Russell's voice was curt, as though he was beginning to resent the cross-examination.

"Then, sir, knowing who I am, you will require no explanation of the withdrawal of my invitation to dinner to-night. You can rest assured that had I known who you were, it would never have been given. I wish you a good morning, sir."

Turning abruptly without waiting for a reply, Admiral Wyon marched out of the shelter, and strode off through the moist air.

Frances, distressed—grieved for the Admiral, whose old wound was bleeding afresh, and wretched for the stranger, whose crime, had he really been guilty of one, must long ago have been absolved—stood alone on the damp pavement of the Parade, torn in two directions: commiseration for the old man urged her to follow his disappearing figure; keen sympathy for the other, whose sensation under the Admiral's unexpected onslaught appeared to be more that of bewilderment than of contrition, held her back.

As, with dragging feet, she walked in the direction of her lodging, Frances felt an increase of compassion for the assailed, who had seemed in ignorance regarding the nature of his offence. She was aware that Admiral Wyon had acted without due inquiry, and she knew that hasty people had rarely time to be just. Besides, the Admiral was not a man to lack

consider. He did not hide either his love or his sorrow. A friendly gallantry was one of his many visible characteristics. The longer she thought matters over, the more strongly was her sympathy directed to her sufficient neighbor.

She had secretly been so abundantly eased by the knowledge that her influence had been chief factor in securing him the Admiral's invitation, by the assurance that the sojourner in this town of houses was not fated to eat his Christmas dinner alone in lodgings, that her disappointment on his behalf was all the more acute. But all her other emotions were dominated by the conviction that he was not guilty. She knew that his admission had seemed to the Admiral conclusive evidence against him. Yet she was intuitively certain that the character of the stranger, whose only evident failing was modesty, was hardly compatible with the personality of the profligate soldier who had callously wrecked the boy's life.

In the ardent glow of championship that flooded her tender heart, Frances forgot prudence, discretion, the reserve that a decorous maiden is expected to reveal in her dealings with the masculine element. She only remembered that here was one on whom her own action in recommending him to Admiral Wyon had brought a crushing indignity. In his position of honorary censor to Budcombe society, the Admiral's disapproval—rooted in misconception, although it might be—would have the effect of barring every door to the stranger. By right of his chosen office the Admiral's spoken condemnation was as powerful as the great taboo.

Impelled thereto by a sense of injustice to her neighbour, Frances acted upon one of those ill-considered impulses that had proved leading factors in her life. Turning, she hastened back to the shelter wherein Russell was still seated, smoking and looking seawards with the abstracted air of one deep in an unsolved problem. He did not appear to have moved since the irate Admiral had left him.

For a moment Frances paused, irresolute. In her ears the quickened pulsations of her heart sounded loud over the subdued *hush-hush* of the grinding cobbles. Then, ashamed of her vacillation, she advanced nearer, and taking her courage in her two hands, spoke :

“Mr. Russell——”

Startled out of his preoccupation, he turned sharply round. Realization of the unexpected identity of his interlocutor brought an instant change of expression. Rising quickly he came towards her.

Frances, conscious of the awkwardness of her position, rushed pell-mell upon somewhat lame explanation.

“I want you to know that I was with Admiral Wyon just now, and that I couldn't help hearing what he said to you. I felt I must come back and tell you that I don't believe it. I'm certain it is all a mistake. And in any case it was ever so long ago—and——” Finding herself in imminent danger of getting bogged amidst attempted palliation, Frances took a bold leap on to solid ground.

“My name is Grant—Frances Grant. We are next-door neighbours. I think you know that,

for you carried down my holly. And what I really wanted to ask was if you would dine with me to-night—at half-past seven. Oh, I know what you are thinking,—that it is dangerous to accept invitations in Budcombe,—but I promise you that nothing on earth, *nothing*, will induce me to withdraw mine !”

Ten minutes later, Frances, a sense of exhilaration lending lightness to her tread, was ascending the steep wynd leading to High Terrace to keep her engagement to take luncheon at Mrs. Penderby’s—an engagement that the exciting events of the morning had almost driven from her recollection.

“What curious folk he must think us,” she thought, flushing hotly at the idea of what his conjectures regarding herself might be. “I wonder what possessed me to ask a strange man to dinner? Really, Cynthia Chauncery might have something to say about my lack of a chaperon now !”

It was a distinct relief to remember that, except she herself told her, Cynthia need never know.

## CHAPTER XXI

### FRANCES IS APPREHENSIVE

MRS. GROMWELL and Miss Eaves eyed Frances with covert disapproval as, hot and apologetic, she entered the Eyrie drawing-room quite ten minutes after the appointed time.

Mrs. Penderby's guests were sisters ; in all other respects they were antipodean. Mrs. Gromwell was large, fat, and soft. In her sable trappings she suggested to Frances's nimble fancy a black slug—one of the huge species that after rain is wont to sally forth upon a ponderous promenade. Miss Eaves was a lean active little woman, the rigid contours of whose tightly fitting bodice suggested that it encased something of the inflexible nature of a stove-pipe, rather than a yielding human form. While Mrs. Gromwell had a habit of subsiding flaccidly into the first chair that offered, Miss Eaves was never still. A startling way of making sudden reference to articles situated behind her had given rise to a report, accorded full credence amongst the children of her acquaintance, that she had eyes in the back of her head.

Miss Eaves acted with unflinching solicitude the part of moral policeman towards her relative's digestion. On this festive occasion her energies were chiefly employed in preventing poor Mrs. Gromwell partaking of the dishes she most fancied.



"*Eliza!*" she interjected in an ominous whisper when Mrs. Gromwell advanced a podgy hand towards the lobster sauce. And her warning—"Eliza!" conclusively frustrated that lady's inclination towards plum pudding. While a third and even more portentous "*Eliza!*" pronounced sentence of banishment upon her sister-in-law's savoury.

"Anything rich is poison to her. You don't have the nursing of her when she is ill," was her reply to Mrs. Penderby's kindly intentioned protest.

In spite of Mrs. Penderby's endeavours to enliven matters by cheerful conversation, and Frances's efforts to second her, the meal was hardly a gay one. To Frances, whose mind was busy with her own engrossing affairs, it was irksome to sit through what, to her overstrained nerves, seemed an interminable meal; to maintain an aspect of polite interest in her fellow-guest, while Mrs. Gromwell munched industriously with toothless gums, and Miss Eaves made active work with teeth that clicked as they wrought. The luncheon was the event of the day to both ladies, and they dealt with it after no perfunctory fashion.

It was as she noticed the succession of dainty dishes, that the sudden realization of how meagre a meal she had to offer her guest turned Frances cold. Accustomed to the liberal resources of a big establishment, she was apt to forget the limitations imposed by an unprovided larder. The recollection that she had ordered a fowl, and that Mrs. Lett had insisted upon making her a present of a plum-pudding, afforded her a little consolation.

"A man coming to dine with a woman on a few

hours' notice wouldn't expect much," she assured herself. "And a fowl is always nice."

When she saw a strawberry-cream taken away untasted, Frances decided to throw herself on the charity of her hostess, and, telling of the predicament in which she had placed herself, beg for some crumbs from her table.

The tedious meal at length ended, an adjournment was made to the drawing-room, where tea and hot cakes ("*Eliza!*" again from Miss Eaves) and cold cakes were served; then, the closed vehicle that was to convey them home appearing, the foot-warmer was filled, and the ladies, well muffled up—Mrs. Gromwell looking like a moving mountain of wraps—were escorted down the front path and ensconced therein, Miss Eaves wasting a precious five minutes in instructing the driver to proceed slowly, and to avoid motors, which conveyances she designated "death-dealing instruments."

"Like lobster sauce, and plum-pudding, and savouries," said Mrs. Penderby, as they turned from watching the departure.

"*And* toasted tea-cakes," added Frances.

"With so many dangers imminent, it will be a mercy if the poor dears reach home alive. Isn't it queer," commented Mrs. Penderby, tucking her arm confidentially in that of Frances, "that it's only on the occasions when I ask people merely from a desire to give them pleasure that I feel as though I ought to apologize for my entertainment? When I invite people through purely selfish motives, they always leave me feeling quite pleased with myself and all the world. Queer, isn't it?"

But Frances, busied with perturbing thoughts, was not listening.

“Mrs. Penderby, I wonder if you’d think me very——”

Frances’s hesitating sentence was fated never to be finished, for the querulous protest of the gate as it swung open on unoiled hinges made them glance round to see Mr. Andrew Frew, the banker of Budcombe, carrying a big bunch of orchids, arrive to deliver his Christmas greeting in person.

Perhaps it was that the flowers gave Mr. Frew the festive appearance of some belated wedding-guest : more probably it was the fact that the usually composed Mrs. Penderby blushed and twittered like a girl as she accepted the floral offering, that, by introducing a new idea, served for the moment to evict Frances’s own concerns from her mind. “Could it be possible that for the third time Mrs. Penderby trembled on the brink of matrimony ?”

The whimsical notion shortened her adieux, and sent Frances chuckling homewards, as she mentally pictured the added confusion entailed upon Mrs. Penderby’s circle of acquaintances if, in her future conversations, the characteristics of the orchid-growing Scottish banker were intermixed with those of the sportive Indian judge and of the lugubrious Anglican rector !

The imagined humour of the situation raised Frances’s spirits, and even served vicariously to allay her fears as to the bare condition of her larder. Mrs. Lett, she assured herself, was a woman of resource, and a capable plain cook. She would be certain to contrive something that would effectively conceal the poverty of the land. On the evening that Cynthia

Chauncery had arrived unexpectedly, she had sent up quite a nice little dinner. And now, even if the supplies did happen to be short, so many of the tradesmen were related to Mrs. Lett, that provision would be made somehow.

Feeling rashly secure in that lady's power of management Frances, entering the little hall, paused after putting her umbrella in the stand, and, determined to lose no more time, called briskly :

"Mrs. Lett! Mrs. Lett!"

It was Gusta who, in answer to the summons, popped her head—adorned by a ridiculous cap which was secured to her cropped locks by an elastic band—out of the door leading to the back premises, with the inquiry : "Was you a-hollerin', Miss?"

"Yes. I want to see Mrs. Lett," Frances replied, smiling kindly at the quaint little figure. "You won't do this time, Gusta."

"But Missis 'as gone, Miss. An' she won't be back till ever so late, neither. She ain't been gone more nor an hour. Mr. Jabez he come hisself, an' druve her."

With a sudden accession of despair Frances, feeling as though her knees had given way, sank into the hall chair.

A guest to dinner—one who for all she knew might be a gourmet—and nobody to cook it. Although she had pledged her word that nothing would induce her to withdraw the invitation, Frances was sorely tempted to write explaining the untoward circumstance and asking her guest to dine with her on the following evening instead.

That mode of action shewed an enticing and quite

plausible way out of the difficulty, and she was assuring herself that she could act upon it without shewing any discourtesy, when the matter was decided for her.

On entering, she had left the porch door open, and from her seat in the hall she caught a glimpse of a couple of heads bobbing down the path on the further side of the hedge.

“That’s Miss Mithen and Peter. They’re a-goin’ to the party too,” volunteered Gusta. “Miss Mithen, she didn’t think as how she could go, till her gentleman said last night as how he was a-goin’ out to dinner, on Christmas. An’ Miss Mithen she sat up all night a-cuttin’ the body of her purple silk into a low neck !”

Bereft of her last hope, Frances resigned herself to the worst.

“Miss Mithen’s gentleman is coming to take dinner with me, Gusta.”

Trying not to notice the silently expressed “Lor, Miss !” in Gusta’s round eyes, she went on hurriedly : “What have we to give him ? I’m afraid there isn’t anything very nice.”

“Oh, there’s a be-utiful dinner, Miss. There’s the roast chicken an’ the Christmas puddin’, what Missis made with her compliments, an’ the rum jelly with whipped cream. An’ there’s the sea-kale and the potatoes——”

“I suppose there’s no soup ? Or any way of getting some fish ?” Frances asked dubiously.

Gusta was shaking her head with a decision that endangered the equilibrium of the ridiculous cap, when a bright idea struck her.

"Tell 'e wot, Miss. 'Ave a tin o' salmon. Missis 'as one in the cupboard. "That 'ud be fine an' tasty with a drop o' vinegar."

Gusta offered the suggestion with the pride of one advancing a certain solution to a tough problem.

"No. The fowl and vegetables, and the sweets, will have to do. And we will have coffee afterwards. You can make coffee, can't you? But don't make it till I ask for it."

Had Frances Grant been a real heroine she would have donned a picturesque apron and, developing a hitherto unexpected genius for cookery, would have descended to the kitchen and evolved a super-excellent little dinner out of nothing at all. Unfortunately Frances was an ordinary member of the leisured classes, and to her even the plainest of plain cooking was a dark mystery.

"I'm afraid I don't know how to help you, Gusta. Do you think you will be able to manage alone?"

"Lor! Yes, Miss. Why, I does 'arf of the cookin' most days," was Gusta's reassuring if inaccurate reply.

"And you will try to have dinner ready punctual—half-past seven exactly, remember."

"I've a good fire on now, Miss."

Trying hard to bolster up her faith in Gusta's culinary attainments, Frances went upstairs.

"After all, anybody can cook a chicken," she assured herself. "And the jelly is ready, and the pudding has only to be heated. There is really very little chance of anything going wrong. It is not as if we were attempting to give him an elaborate meal."

"What odd, erratic people Mr. Russell must think us," she thought again as she took off her hat. "First an old gentleman whom he has never before seen calls and insists upon his accepting an invitation to dinner. Then next morning the same old gentleman pounces upon him and, after throwing obscure aspersions on his character, defies him to attempt to enter his door. Then close upon the heels of the irate old gentleman's departure a forward young woman whom he scarcely *knows* rushes up and invites him to dine with her. And worst of all, when he does come, she has no dinner to give him. If only I had paused to consider before I asked him. Oh, dear, dear, will I never learn sense!"

She dressed betimes—putting on the black chiffon gown that, a year earlier, her critical cousin had deigned to praise—then gave her attention to the laying of the table.

However weird and wonderful the meal might taste, she was determined that it would look nice. When at length she set the door wide open and, retreating to the landing, tried to view the scene with the unaccustomed eyes of a stranger, she was pleased to find that the little room, with its daintily spread table, looked particularly cosy and attractive. The fire burnt brightly. The holly, woven into wreaths, imparted a suitably Christmassy element. Light, filtered through the rose-pink lamp-shade, cast a becoming roseate glow over everything.

As the momentous hour approached, Frances found herself becoming more and more nervous. Lifting the long skirt of her delicate gown, she slipped down to the kitchen.

"Everything's a-doin' be-utiful, Miss," Gusta announced, with an inflated air of self-confidence. "It's all ready now, An' whenever I lets in the gentleman, I'll dish it up."

Cheered by her optimism, Frances returned to her room, where she sat nervously waiting till the clock on her mantelpiece chimed a quarter to eight—in common with the majority of her sex, Frances cherished a distorted notion that she gained some sort of nebulous advantage by keeping her time-piece a quarter of an hour fast.

Coincident with its stroke came the sound of the closing of the next door, the echo of a quick tread down the gravelled path outside, the clang of Miss Mithen's gate, the querulous groan of Mrs. Lett's gate as it opened.

"I must really remind Mrs. Lett to oil that gate," Frances made mechanical resolution as with quickened pulses she listened to the footsteps approaching nearer.

A minute later Gusta, her cap askew, her immature figure enswathed in a preposterously large apron—the Christmas gift of her mistress, who had evidently selected it in the expectation of Gusta attaining abnormal proportions in an incredibly short period of time—was ushering in the guest.

"It's Miss Mithen's gentleman, if you please, Miss."



## CHAPTER XXII

### SHORT COMMONS

**I**T was fortunate for Frances that her diplomatic experience had left her endowed with the art of seeming at ease under even the most trying social circumstances, for her guest proved constrained and lacking in small talk.

Frances, her ears alert for every sound of Gusta's movements downstairs, skilfully steered the conversation to the safe topic of the differing merits of English watering-places. In her desire to avoid any reference to the belligerent Admiral she became almost garrulous on the diverse advantages of Brighton, Bournemouth, and Torquay—a subject, by the way, on which she was scarcely qualified to speak.

It was with intense secret relief that they heard the panting of Gusta labouring under the burden of a heavy tray, as she climbed the stair.

"This room is too small to allow of waiting. We must help ourselves," Frances explained when Gusta, having placed the nicely browned roast fowl and the vegetables on the table, quitted the room with the self-complacent air of one who has accomplished great doings.

"Let me carve," Mr. Russell had suggested; and Frances, well pleased to be relieved of the ordeal,

had gladly assented to his proposal. It was only when she saw him pause and, carvers in hand, dubiously eye the bird before him, that she realized that her sense of deliverance might have been premature.

"What is it? Is anything wrong? It *looks* all right," she was saying anxiously, when the solution of his difficulty flashed upon her, putting her to further confusion. For on the rare occasions when she ordered a chicken, Mrs. Lett, who was an expert in the art of catering for solitary lodgers, was in the custom of removing the lower limbs and reserving them to be cooked *en casserole* next day, and of serving the severely docked, but still quite presentable, carcass roasted. Thus the dish placed before the puzzled guest presented the anatomical problem of a creature amply furnished with wings, but totally unprovided with walking apparatus.

Blushing furiously, Frances explained.

"How dreadfully mean he will think me!" she thought, plunged into the depths of humiliation. "To provide nothing but a chicken, and then to have half of that reserved for next day's dinner!"

It soothed her to see that her guest, his initial perplexity over, carved the bird as though there was nothing of the abnormal in its appearance: that he ate the sea-kale in apparent ignorance that it was cooked to savourless strings; and that he seemed happily oblivious of the fact that the potatoes were void of salt.

The first course having proved a hollow mockery, Frances, after the blithe fashion of her sanguine temperament, proceeded to transfer her dependence to the rich solidity of the plum-pudding and the

nourishing qualities of the rum-jelly. She knew she could depend upon the super-excellence of Mrs. Lett's gift ; and the jelly with its crown of whipped cream she had seen ready for serving in its crystal dish. There could be no doubt, she assured herself, about either of these sweets.

A peculiar odour that was momentarily becoming more insistent she optimistically refused to believe could have any connexion with the meal in progress.

But when Gusta reappeared to remove the remains of the first course, it was with a decidedly crestfallen air that she deposited on the table a large dish containing an insignificant mound of dark-hued mash from which issued the concentrated odour whose increasing intensity had been rendering Frances uneasy.

"Why, what is this, Gusta?" she asked, as unconcernedly as possible.

"Please, 'm, when I started to lift the pudding outen the saucepan, it fell clean on to the hearth."

"The pudding fell clean—oh, Gusta, how stupid of you to let it drop!"

"But I never did, Miss. I had a good firm holt of the cloth all the time. But the bottom was burned clean outen it, an' the pudding fell through. It wasn't my fault, Miss. I never done nothing to it. An' I scraped it up as well as I could."

The plum-pudding burnt! This then was the interpretation of the detestable smell. The sigh that Frances gave was heavy with the resignation of despair.

"Well, I suppose it was an accident. Take the pudding away and bring the jelly."

"The jelly is our last hope," she said, striving to conceal her humiliation under a cloak of levity. "If anything happens to that, there is no help for it, we must starve."

"Then let us pray for the safe guidance of the jelly," her guest responded, almost gaily.

Gusta had left the door wide open, and as they waited they could hear her, proceeding with the utmost caution, slowly mounting the stair. Just as she reached the top step and came into sight with the glass dish tightly clutched in her outstretched hands, her foot caught in the hem of the exaggerated apron and she fell prone, while the jelly, turning a somersault, descended upon its whipped cream crown.

For a pregnant moment Frances felt impelled to howl with vexation. Then, as she raised her eyes from the spread-eagled figure of the ill-starred Gusta and met the eyes of her guest, a sense of the ludicrous overcame them both, and they simultaneously exploded into irrepressible laughter; remaining convulsed until Gusta—somewhat relieved to find that the "gentry" sustained the loss of their dinner thus cheerfully—had resumed the perpendicular, gathered up the shapeless remains of the jelly and departed downstairs.

"Well, companion in misfortune, what are we to do now?" asked Frances, resting her arms on the table and bending towards him, her piquant face aglow with merriment. "I should be terrified for the consequences if I asked Gusta to bring up anything else to-night. If I ordered coffee, she'd be certain to scald herself in making it. But can you take

tea—tea and cake? I have a tea-basket, and the efforts of the Budcombe confectioner are famed.”

“Tea and cake sounds most tempting,” agreed the guest heartily. The meagre nature of the diet offered did not appear to have caused him the slightest concern.

Nothing is so successful as a shared domestic catastrophe in melting the frigid zone surrounding a new acquaintance. By the time the kettle was singing over the fire and the cake was cut, the twain felt something of that community of interest experienced by those who have endured mutual privation.

As, sitting by the hearth, they chatted, Frances could not help noticing that, in as far as was possible, Russell avoided speaking of himself. Once or twice when he seemed on the verge of breaking through his habit of reserve, of referring to some individual experience, to her disappointment he caught himself up and relapsed into the impersonal. But although evidently disinclined to be communicative regarding his own doings, her guest revealed undoubted interest in hers. Finding that he had known her uncle, Sir Alan Grant, by repute, Frances felt drawn to speak of her old life at St. Hertha: a tropical life so different to her present existence in England that it almost seemed to have been passed æons ago in some other world.

Russell had definitely refused to smoke. And although Frances appreciated the respect for her one sitting-room which prompted his decision, she regretted that decision. “If only he would smoke, I’d be certain he wasn’t bored,” she thought.

When conversation showed sign of flagging, they struck a fresh chord of unison in their mutual love of music. Though Frances had no singing voice, she was a practised and sympathetic accompanist, and Mr. Russell acknowledged that he sang when he got the opportunity.

Springing up, Frances opened the piano and brought out the sweet old songs that she had so often played for Sir Alan. Russell's voice was tuneful, and he sang with taste. Time slipped past unnoticed. It was with a little shock of dismay that Frances discovered that it was late.

"Eleven o'clock—and that poor infant sitting up downstairs to let you out!" she exclaimed in contrition, speeding the parting guest unceremoniously. "We must not keep her out of bed a moment longer."

With the striking of the hour, the visitor had changed from the friend with the tuneful voice to the reserved stranger of her earlier acquaintance. Taking her hand in farewell, Russell held it as though struggling with polite speeches that obstinately refused to allow themselves to be uttered; then, dropping it, departed with an abrupt "Good night."

Desirous to make amends to Gusta for the abasement that had befallen her, Frances hastened to her room, and rummaging in a drawer, took out a chiffon scarf that she had seen Gusta view with admiring eyes.

"This is a little present for you, Gusta," she said, when that damsel appeared with her hot water. "And I'll tell Mrs. Lett that, thanks to you, we enjoyed the evening immensely."

But Gusta stood in no need of consolation. Her

eyes and mouth were wide with amazement. Half an hour earlier she had been sitting Cinderella-like by the ashes of the kitchen fire, bemoaning the wreck of her self-esteem; then of a sudden, the unexpected had happened.

Diving her hand into her pocket, she produced a mysterious something wrapped in a scrap of newspaper. Uncovering it with fingers that fumbled through excitement, she disclosed the contents.

"See what 'e gave me, Miss."

A half-sovereign lay on the little red palm.

"You don't think as how it could 'ave been no mistake, Miss?" Gusta inquired anxiously; the dread possibility of Miss Mithen's gentleman discovering that he had given the more valuable coin in mistake for a sixpence and of his return to reclaim it, was already proving an alloy to her gold. The market value of Gusta's services was eighteenpence a week (and even that modest sum Mrs. Lett often told her she did not earn) and it seemed scarcely probable that any visitor, however lavish, could have intended to pay her an amount equivalent to many weeks' wages for a few hours' service. "'E took it outen his sovereign purse, Miss, I seen 'im do it. Should I take it back to 'e?"

Reassuring Gusta, Frances dismissed her, happy, to bed.

"After all," she thought, "perhaps it all turned out for the best. Suppose Mrs. Lett had been at home, and the dinner had been eatable, and everything had gone smoothly, there would have been no disconcerting occurrences to arouse us out of our prim propriety. Thank Heaven for Gusta's blunders!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A SOMBRE SUITOR

THE morning of Boxing-day was wet and uninviting. Frances, a curious feeling of expectancy dominating her, remained indoors, well content.

She was in a pleasantly introspective state of mind; and familiar music to strum, or a well-conned book to hold in her hand and dream over, best suited her mood.

She had letters to write. Cynthia to thank for the Christmas present that—Mrs. Chauncery's gifts being estimated by her friends' incomes, not by her own—was so much less valuable than her last year's offering had been. And a long gushing epistle from Nannie Chauncery to respond to. Nannie was at that stage when her immature affections, tendril-like, groped blindly for human substance upon which to fasten themselves. At present they twined closely round Frances.

At noon the rain-clouds that had been creeping across were swept inland before a brisk south-westerly breeze. The tardy sun flashed out, drying the wet stones, and making the air bright and buoyant.

Putting on her hat, Frances was on the point of going out when the sight of her neighbour's horse made her draw back into the shelter of the curtains to await his departure. A foolish reluctance, whose



underlying motive she scarcely understood, caused her to shrink from the appearance of seeking encounter with the man with whom on the previous night she had been on terms of approaching intimacy.

She had heard the door of the adjoining house shut, had seen Mr. Russell walk briskly down the path, mount the steed and canter off up the road leading east by the coastguard station. Then, feeling free to venture out, she was turning away from the window when her attention was attracted by a man dressed in deep mourning who was walking slowly along, scanning, as he went, the houses on the parade.

Her notice caught and held by something oddly reminiscent in the man's appearance, she was observing him curiously, when he surprised her by opening the gate and walking slowly up the path towards her house.

"A new lodger for Mrs. Lett," she had decided, when the approaching visitor, raising his tall crape-bound hat to wipe his brow with a black bordered handkerchief, disclosed the features of Mr. Rock—the Man from the Midlands.

"How absurd! He must be coming to take rooms here," she thought, as she stepped back out of sight. "I suppose the Canveys told him of this place, as they told me. How ridiculous it would be to be in the same house with him again."

"It's a gentleman to see you, m'm. Mr. Rock."

"To see me? Are you certain, Mrs. Lett?"

Frances's incredulity was genuine. Somehow she had quite failed to associate this reappearance of her old boarding-house associate with herself.

"The gentleman asked for Miss Grant, m'm. From London, he said he were."

"Ask Mr. Rock to come upstairs," said Frances, totally bewildered as to the meaning of this unexpected call.

A minute's pause, then Mr. Rock, arrayed in garments that were the embodiment of woe, and very creaky patent leather boots, entered the room.

"She's dead," he made laconic announcement, as he shook hands and Frances relieved him of his be-craped hat and his umbrella. "Died in October, she did. The twenty-fifth. Sudden at the end, it was. She was only two days in bed."

He took her knowledge of his affairs so much for granted that Frances, unwilling to reveal her total ignorance, and moved by the desire to show polite interest, murmured: "Only two days in bed. Really—how sad!"

"Yes. I never thought she'd have followed uncle that close. But she never was the same—not after the old man died. Seemed to me the idea of the money worried her."

His voice had taken Frances back with a jerk to an experience she had no desire to remember, to her short stay in the Bloomsbury boarding-house, and, with the recollection, a light broke upon her.

"Oh, it is your aunt you are speaking of. Yes, I remember you bought her a bonnet. I am sincerely sorry to hear of your loss. You must miss her dreadfully."

"To tell you the truth, I never thought I'd have missed her so much. Doesn't seem the same house, it doesn't. Even her cranky ways, I miss 'em." Mr.

Rock stopped to blow his nose with the black-edged pocket-handkerchief, and Frances liked him for the moisture in his eyes.

"And you have come to Budcombe for change of air? Are you looking for rooms on the Parade? I suppose the Canveys told you of the place?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss?"

"Didn't the Canveys—that old lady and her daughter who were at the boarding-house—tell you to come here? They recommended these rooms to me."

"No. I was thinking of putting up at the hotel. Fact is—I heard you were here."

"Heard that I was here! Why, who could tell you that?"

"It was the manageress at Brandreth House. You had sent her a Christmas card or something, and she told me you were here."

Remembering the impulse of pity that had induced her to send a box of fresh-cut flowers with her good wishes to the patient woman who passed her life ministering to impatient folk, Frances as usual saw reason to regret her action.

"How stupid I was to have written," she thought. "The flowers would have done without any address. I don't want all Bloomsbury appearing to claim me?"

But Mr. Rock, although uninvited, was still her guest; she could not be inhospitable. Ascertaining that Mr. Rock had arrived by train that afternoon, she rang for an early tea, and proceeded to make polite inquiries regarding their mutual Bloomsbury acquaintances. But Mr. Rock had little information to impart. A new set of people occupied the little green tables. The Canveys had removed to another

boarding-house, but were still in the same neighbourhood. He had met them at service at the Foundling Hospital on Christmas morning. Miss Ivy Darling had disappeared. Somebody said she had gone on the stage.

"But tell me about yourself, Mr. Rock," Frances asked kindly, when his meagre budget of gossip was exhausted, and he still lingered in evident nervous disquietude.

Her interested inquiry lent him new life. She had introduced a subject regarding which even the least conversational finds his tongue.

"Well, you see, it's changed days with me. While the old folks were alive I wasn't what you might call my own master. Uncle, he did well enough, but he hadn't any enterprise. And aunt, she was terrified at the name of outlay. But now that things are in my own hands I mean to bring them up to date, like. I'm going to"—here he bent forward and dropped his voice to a confidential whisper, as though on the point of delivering himself of a momentous secret—"advertise and go ahead"

"I'm sure you will be successful," Frances prophesied with hearty good will. "You have my warm good wishes."

"Thank you, Miss. If work'll do it, and enterprise, it shall be done."

"How do you manage without your Aunt?" The entrance of the tea-tray had suggested household affairs. "About housekeeping, and that sort of thing, I mean."

She had asked the question idly, more as a suitable subject of conversation than from any interest

in the reply. To her dismay the innocent question apparently filled Mr. Rock with confusion. Flushing hotly, he nervously began putting on the gloves—black kid ones with irritatingly curly astrakhan backs—of which he had so nervously divested himself a minute earlier.

During the trying moment, craven thoughts urged him to flight. But Mr. Rock had travelled thus far with a certain purpose, and his latent courage would not suffer him to return with that intention unfulfilled, even although its enactment might prove so much more arduous a task than he had anticipated.

Mr. Rock had heard of Frances being in "reduced" circumstances, and had cherished the notion of raising her to what he considered an affluent position. But when at last he had discovered where she lived, and had sought her out, he had discovered her in a lodging that, although not palatial, was full of the evidences of a refined existence. He had found her even more lovely and charming than was the recollection treasured by his memory, and quite as unconscious as ever that his regard for her might be aught other than the friendly feeling cherished by a passing acquaintance; what marvel that his bravery threatened to forsake him!

Had Frances been a little less unconscious, had she even seemed embarrassed when she asked that leading question as to his future, in place of sandwiching it between inquiries as to whether he took sugar and commending the buttered scones to his notice, he would have felt emboldened. Still, at the critical juncture the assurance resultant upon the knowledge that, judged by the matrimonial

standards of Diddleswick, he was a very eligible bachelor indeed, did not wholly desert him.

"That's what I came to consult you about," he said.

"To consult me? How nice of you. That will be most interesting."

Frances was smiling as she stirred her tea. Evidently she was totally unaware of the vast issues at stake.

"You see, I thought of marrying," Rock blurted out desperately.

"I'm sure you will make a very kind husband, Mr. Rock. You were so good to your aunt."

Frances spoke in all sincerity. She remembered his thoughtful endeavour not to hurt the parsimonious old lady's feelings over the matter of the bonnet. But she was hardly prepared for the sudden effusion of Mr. Rock's manner, or for the increase of confidence with which he hastened to ask the crucial question. "Then will you marry me, Miss Grant?"

"I? Oh! Good gracious! *no*. You are joking, Mr. Rock."

Frances, completely taken by surprise, had exclaimed involuntarily, but a glance at his perturbed face showed that nothing was further from Mr. Rock's thoughts than jest.

"Then you won't have me?" he asked dolefully, yet as one still unconvinced. "It's not a new idea with me, mind. I've been thinking about it off and on ever since I met you last January. I'm in a different position now, being my own master, and a good bit of money in the bank, and all that. And I wouldn't require to stay not what you would call close at the works. We could go off for jaunts to London or Brighton, or maybe Paris, now

and again. And we would keep two women servants, and a trap, or even"—this was a daring inspiration of the moment—"a motor-car!"

The greatest honour any man can pay a woman is to ask her to become his wife, and Frances's voice was very gentle as she tried to convince Mr. Rock of the impossibility of his ever attaining the desire of his heart.

"It is exceedingly good of you. I assure you I greatly appreciate the honour you have done me," she was saying, casting about in her mind for conciliatory phrases in which to cloak the naked fact of her rejection.

But just as she began speaking, from where she sat by the window she caught sight of Admiral Wyon, his plaid swinging from his shoulders, his white locks ruffled by the breeze, striding up the path. With the inward conviction that the Admiral had come on purpose to discuss the supposed misdeeds of her neighbour, Frances relegated the love-affairs of Mr. Rock—which were much more intimately connected with herself—to a secondary place. For that day at least was the suitor fated to retain possession of his castle in the air.

Perhaps Mr. Rock regarded the intervention of another visitor as a respite. At the worst it gave him an excuse for returning to claim his answer. Meanwhile, shirking the ordeal of leave-taking, he lingered munching cake mechanically because Frances had handed it to him, and returning confused and muffled replies when addressed.

"Who is our lugubrious friend? An undertaker?" inquired the Admiral lightly, as they watched Rock's sable-clad form walking soberly down the path.

"No, an old acquaintance. He called about a business matter," Frances made restrained answer. A sincere regard for Mr. Rock made her refuse to see anything to ridicule in his appearance.

As he neared the gate, Russell, just returned from his ride, was walking up the adjoining path. As the two men came abreast of each other, the interested spectators at the window were surprised to see that as their gaze met across the low hedge the two men had recognized each other, for, pausing, they exchanged greetings. They noticed too that when Russell offered a hand in token of friendship, Rock appeared to hesitate an instant before accepting it.

It was evident that Russell had invited Rock to visit his rooms, for walking a step or two in the rear of the other as though reluctant to accompany him, Rock followed up the path. A minute later they had disappeared into Miss Mithen's house.

With the closing of the door the two watchers turned to each other.

"He knows that Russell!" cried Wyon.

"He knows Mr. Rock!" cried Frances.

"Shall you see this man again? Is his business with you completed?"

"No-o. Not quite. He is staying at the hotel. I shall probably see him to-morrow," Frances acknowledged, blushing secretly with the consciousness of the nature of his so-called "business."

"Then if you question him, I'm certain you'll find out that I am right about this Russell," pronounced the dogmatic Admiral.

"If I question him, I'm certain I'll find out you're wrong about this Russell," retorted Frances gaily.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### MR. ROCK PROVES STAUNCH

**A** FEELING of restless impatience drove Frances out of doors immediately after breakfast next morning.

Mr. Rock was to call in the afternoon, and although under other circumstances she would have shrunk from the ordeal of telling him that his hope of ever winning her affection was without foundation, her desire to gain information that might enable her to vindicate Russell's character in the estimation of Admiral Wyon was so great, that she was in danger of forgetting the object of Rock's visit to Budcombe. To her impatient spirit the time of Rock's visit seemed so far distant that, thinking to speed the lagging hours by physical exertion, she set out to climb the west cliff.

The wind had fallen. The fawn-hued waves, as they met the beach, showed lace broidery of foam. The day was mild, the air sweet. Climbing upwards to where a few lemon-yellow buds were opening on the grey-green gorse that made prickly barricade about the edge of the cliff, Frances paused to take breath ; and turning, looked back on the little town that had afforded her friendly shelter. Eastwards beyond its huddled roofs, she could see the curve of the Parade with its semi-circle of cottages facing the

sea. In one of these the man from whose reputation she had pledged herself to clear the stain sat at work.

Turning again towards the steep path, Frances mounted on and on until, on rounding a twist of the way, she came upon the bench in a sheltered nook that she had come to regard as a half-way resting-place. Someone had been before her. The seat she found was already occupied by Mr. Rock who, before taking possession, had wisely spread a sheet of the newspaper he carried over its moist boards.

"Oh, Mr. Rock! are you here?" Frances, completely taken by surprise, made blatant inquiry.

Rising hurriedly, Mr. Rock uttered a vague remark respecting the beauty of the day, and laying the remaining half of his paper on the bench, invited her to be seated.

Mr. Rock had replaced his crape-bound tall hat by a tweed travelling-cap; otherwise he was garbed as on the previous day. His commonplace figure in its woful trappings presented so little of the accepted aspect of the suitor, that Frances might almost be excused for ignoring the subject that occupied his thoughts, and promptly introducing the matter that dominated her own.

"I was so anxious to see you," she began, scarcely waiting to recover the breath she had lost in climbing the high cliff. "There is something I wish so much to speak to you about——"

"And I'm precious glad to hear it," Mr. Rock rejoined earnestly, "for I didn't sleep a wink last night. Not a single wink," he added impressively.

"Oh! I am so sorry." Frances's sympathy flowed as readily to the call of a physical discomfort

as to that of a mental ill. "Was the hotel noisy? I thought any place in Budcombe would have been quiet. Listen!"—the united sounds of the little town scarcely warred with the murmur of the incoming tide as it broke at the base of the cliff far below—"hear how quiet it is now. And this is the only really busy time of the day!"

"No. It wasn't noise that kept me awake. It was the uncertainty. . . and having to go away yesterday when that old gentleman came in, and the not knowing what to think. And then thinking I wouldn't know till his afternoon, and—and all that."

Although Mr. Rock's sentence had the appearance of ambiguity, in addition to an impotent ending, his meaning was clear.

"Yes—I wanted to speak about that too. Dear Mr. Rock, it was good of you to think of it, but I'm afraid it can't be. I would not make a suitable wife for you. I am not at all a good housekeeper, and—" Frances was at her wits' end for excuses that would at least sound feasible—"and indeed I don't intend ever to marry. And I'm sure there must be lots of nice girls at Diddleswick who would make good wives. Are there not?"

"Oh, there's plenty of *them*," Mr. Rock acquiesced gloomily, his tone for ever putting the Diddleswick maidens out of court. "Then I suppose there's no need of my waiting on here. You don't think that maybe in time——"

"I *know* it could never be."

"Then I suppose I might as well be getting back to the works again."

Mr. Rock had risen with an air of gloomy finality,

as though prepared that instant to begin the return journey.

"But don't you want to see your friend again before you leave?" Frances interposed, trying not to see the hand he extended in melancholy farewell.

"My friend? I haven't any friend here." Her question had manifestly taken her companion by surprise. "At least there's nobody but you, and you won't——"

"I meant the gentleman who lives in the next house to me on the Parade. I saw him speak to you.

But with her apparently innocent remark Mr. Rock's open face had become unaccountably charged with secretiveness; his candid manner was hampered with ill-worn subtlety. He took refuge in silence.

"Well?" demanded Frances. "You know him, surely? I saw him speak to you."

"He did pass a remark," Mr. Rock made cautious admission.

"But you must have met before, or he wouldn't have recognized you.

"Yes. I allow that."

"And he invited you into his lodgings to have a chat, so you must be friends."

"No, I couldn't go so far as to call him a *friend*. No, not a friend, I couldn't."

Frances was in no mood for hair-splitting. Rock's determined density began to annoy her.

"Well, in any case, you know who Mr. Russell is, and where he comes from—don't you?"

With a colourable imitation of an impenetrable expression, Mr. Rock shook his head.

"Can't you understand? It is not from idle curiosity I am asking," she urged. "But some one here has got a false impression of Mr. Russell—thinks he is not exactly what he appears to be, and says that there is something connected with his past that he doesn't wish known. Oh, Mr. Rock"—there was a note of pain in her pleading voice—"I'm certain it isn't true. Tell me it isn't true?"

On the verge of hasty speech, Mr. Rock opened his lips—then, shutting them with a snap held them tightly closed, as though resolved to prevent the escape of any information, fidgeting the while under the entreating eyes of Frances.

"Then you *won't* tell me?" she said sadly.

"You see it's like this—" he explained in conciliatory tones, re-seating himself upon the bench beside her. "When he saw me here—me never suspecting that he was anywhere near Budcombe till we came face to face like, him coming up his garden path when I was going down yours—well, he made me promise not to say anything at all about him, good or bad. That's what he was asking me when I was in his rooms. He knew I knew, and I suppose he guessed that there might be remarks passed, and inquiries made and that. So, never thinking, I promised. But if I told anybody it would be you." Mr. Rock's manner threatened signs of affection. "If it wasn't that I'd given him my word of honour—if he hadn't so to say gagged me—I—I'd tell you this very minute, blest if I wouldn't!"

Convinced against her most ardent hopes that there would be no triumphant confutation of Russell's guilt wherewith to confront the obdurate Admiral,

Frances, a feeling of utter dismay darkening her mental outlook, sat silent, her unseeing eyes fixed upon the distant horizon ; while Rock, his honest soul torn between loyalty to his given word and the desire to gratify the woman he loved, pondered gloomily beside her.

" Tell you what ! " he exclaimed suddenly, rising to his feet as the solution struck him, as though determined upon taking instant action. " I'll go right down to him now, and I'll see him man to man, and ask him to let me tell you—just you alone—and you'll promise to keep it to yourself. He'd never object to that, surely. That wouldn't be like telling everybody—now, would it ? "

" Oh, no, *no*. You mustn't do that. Certainly not that. I wouldn't for worlds that he knew I had been questioning you. Please don't tell him. Promise that you won't."

A sudden panic of apprehension lest Russell should learn of her seeming curiosity and despise her for it rendered her ten times more anxious to ensure Rock's silence than she had been to urge him to speech. She could not endure the thought that Russell should have reason to imagine her desirous of peeping into his past life, or that he should esteem her capable of seeking to hold his concerns under surveillance.

A long sigh from Mr. Rock broke in upon her abstraction.

" Then I suppose there's nothing for me to hang on here about." Fumbling in a pocket of his black coat he had produced a note-book and was consulting it for information regarding his return journey.

"I'd better fetch my bag from the hotel, and be getting back to town. I see there's a train about one o'clock. 'Tisn't much of a place for liveliness this, anyhow, is it? No pier, no concert-hall, or anything—at least, as far as I can see."

"Budcombe is very quiet," Frances replied absently.

"You think it's no use my waiting on then—or hoping?" he asked humbly.

Filled with swift compassion for this honest-hearted lover to whom she was so much, whilst he was nothing at all to her, Frances lifted tear-dimmed blue eyes to his as she answered in all sincerity—

"No, Mr. Rock. I'm very, very sorry, but I know there is none."

## CHAPTER XXV

### TANTALIZATION

**L** EFT to the company of her thoughts, Frances sat long puzzling over matters without coming any nearer a solution.

On no more solid foundation than a mere personal impression did she feel certain that Russell had not done the things imputed to him. And though the intangible reason of her conviction was the sole evidence in favour of his innocence, the proof against it she felt forced to acknowledge was unquestionably heavy.

Close upon his admission that he had been in the 31st Hussars, and that he had left that regiment hurriedly, came the most condemnatory fact of all—Russell's action in binding Rock over to conceal what he knew of him.

Even while she assured herself that her intuition was right, Frances earnestly craved a more tangible weapon with which to combat the Admiral's accusatory charge. Although she steadfastly believed Russell to be incapable of a mean action, her heart sank at the thought of her coming interview with Admiral Wyon, when she would be obliged to confess that Russell had taken prompt steps to set a seal upon the lips of one who, he guessed, might be questioned regarding his previous knowledge of him.



Rising wearily as a distant chime reminded her that it was one o'clock, Frances began to descend the cliff path at the moment that Mr. Rock, in the train speeding London-wards, was secretly lamenting the sense of honour that had made him feel bound to refuse the first favour Frances had ever begged of him.

"We might have had a nice chat about his doings, and that might have led to other things, if only I hadn't given my promise and kept it," he reproached himself miserably. "The more fool me!"

Fortune seemed determined to deal scurvily with Frances that day. It played her another mean trick by denying her time to marshal her slender forces of argument in favour of the accused before meeting Admiral Wyon; for, in passing the Club-house on her way back, she encountered Wyon leaving it to go home to luncheon. A fellow clubman accompanied him, and as the twain seemed deep in the discussion that the old sailor loved, she hoped to slip by unnoticed. But before she had turned the corner into the Parade Wyon had overtaken her.

"Well! Your melancholy visitor has not tarried long in Budcombe," he said. "I passed him as he was driving to the station in the hotel bus. Did you see him again before he left?"

"Yes. I met him by chance this morning," Frances confessed unwillingly.

"Then you would get some information from him about this Russell. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" echoed the Admiral in undisguised annoyance. "Why—didn't you ask him?"

" Yes, I asked him, but he couldn't tell me anything, except that he had known Mr. Russell before coming here."

" And didn't he say where he had known him, or when, or under what circumstances, or anything at all."

Frances shook her head.

" No, not anything at all, I'm afraid."

" But you promised me you would ask him——"

" I did ask Mr. Rock, but he declined to say."

" Did he give you any reason ? "

In earlier days the Admiral had prided himself on his gift of cross-examination at courts martial. He was bringing some of his power to bear upon his present reluctant witness.

" Oh, come, Miss Grant. He could hardly refuse to say anything without giving a reason."

" Yes. He did give a reason," Frances answered unwillingly.

" Then what was that reason ? You know what a vital matter this is to me," he urged as she hesitated ; " and it cannot be of the slightest moment to you. If you know of any reason for this Rock's refusal to speak, tell it, I implore you."

*Was* the matter of no moment to her ! Standing before her questioner, Frances realized that it was of so much moment to her that no amount of interrogation would drag that apparently incriminating reason from her. Her ancestry had numbered many warriors, and her fighting blood was prepared to do battle in what she feared might be the losing side.

" They seemed to be on friendly enough terms when Russell asked him into his rooms," Wyon

was musing aloud. "Ah! I see!" he exclaimed, startling her with the scarce-expected astuteness of his conclusion. "Your man did not speak because he had pledged his word not to tell anything incriminating."

"He had promised not to tell anything at all, *good* or bad," Frances amended hastily, finding that her attempt at extenuation had proved unavailing. "Mr. Rock said so particularly."

Admiral Wyon laughed bitterly.

"One man does not take the trouble to bind another over not to speak *well* of him. It isn't in human nature, my dear. Well, I'm afraid we must make up our minds that Russell is a thoroughly bad egg. If I had been inclined to waver—and I wasn't—this latest discovery would have assured me positively that he is the man I believe him to be. Now that I have something to go on, I must warn our friends against him. If he is wise he will leave Budcombe at once."

It was with nothing of her accustomed blitheness of step that Frances returned home. She liked the Admiral, and apart from the later development of affairs the recollection that she had concealed from him the fact of Russell's Christmas-day visit weighed heavily on her conscience.

Sir Alan used to warn her to curb the too ready sympathy that had been his besetting pitfall also.

"You and I should always sleep over everything before we do anything, Fan," he had declared solemnly. And Frances had replied gaily that the pursuance of such a method would ensure their passing most of the remainder of their lives in bed! Still, even now she

could not truthfully say that she regretted the evening she had spent alone with Russell.

"It would have been no use asking any one to join us at such short notice. Every one was already engaged," she sought to soothe her conscience by assuring herself. "Besides, there was nothing fit to eat, and even though he did not seem to notice it, other people would."

"You're that late, Miss, me and Missis thought as how you'd fallen over the cliff an' been killed," Gusta made cheerful pronouncement, as Frances entered the little hall. "And Mrs. Penderby's gardener he brought a note wantin' a hanswer, an' you not in, 'e did!"

How it is that, when we most earnestly desire solitude in which to think out some special line of action, the petty affairs of our lives insist upon placing themselves prominently before us, and tendering insistent claims upon our attention?

In the note Mrs. Penderby hoped that Frances had not forgotten her promise to walk to West Budcombe with her that afternoon to take tea with Mrs. Gromwell and Miss Eaves. "I shall call for you at half-past two. Tell Waldie if that hour will suit you. The old dears take tea at four o'clock precisely, and I want time for a long chat with you first. I have *a piece of news* that I can only tell you when we are *quite alone*."

The engagement made lightly on Christmas Day had in the swift movement of the intervening hours been completely forgotten. The involuntary smile with which Frances greeted the coy hint of a coming disclosure that to her would be fiddler's news was

fast succeeded by an expression of dismay. At another time she would have enjoyed the prospect of a walk with so congenial a companion as her twice-widowed friend. Now she was conscious only of an inexplicable sense of reluctance to leave home.

Ruthlessly analysing her feeling, she found that it sprang from a silly fear that by being absent that afternoon she might miss a visit from her maligned neighbour. Taking her wavering self severely in hand, Frances promptly dispatched Gusta with a message to the effect that she would be ready to start for West Budcombe at the hour Mrs. Penderby had mentioned, then sat down dejectedly to her neglected luncheon.

Even if Mr. Russell did call that day and found her out, there was to-morrow, and the next day and all the days that were to follow—she reminded herself by way of cold comfort—he would surely return.

The rain of the two preceding days had left the inland lanes still moist. The way to West Budcombe Frances, who carried the added weight of a burdened heart, found heavy walking. But Mrs. Penderby tripped it with the light step of a girl.

As she received the confidence of her more mature friend, even while she sympathized whole-heartedly with it Frances marvelled with the never-ending bewilderment of the young at the revelation that their elders can experience emotions that they have been accustomed to believe the sole property of youth.

Mrs. Penderby's pleasant voice had trembled when she told of her betrothal to Mr. Frew, the banker. Tears of happy pride had dimmed her eyes as she

spoke of the many beautiful attributes of her Andrew. And Frances, knowing how tenderly she kept green the memories of the past lords of her affections, thought with something approaching envy of the wealth of romantic sentiment that rendered Mrs. Penderby able, with warm sincerity of soul, to contemplate adding yet a third to their number.

"My nature must be cold," Frances counselled herself. "I must be incapable of love, or I would not have lived to my age without once really falling in love." Frances was twenty-four, and she chose entirely to ignore the episode of Mason Trent; for womanlike, now that she had discovered how false her estimate of him had been, she refused absolutely to believe that she had ever actually loved him. And who was there to tell her that the cord that at that moment was dragging her back to the little house on the Parade was cruelly tangled amongst her heart strings?

Mrs. Gromwell and Miss Eaves held joint occupation of an old-fashioned cottage in the one street of the village. Looking round their sitting-room, Frances thought she could distinguish Mrs. Gromwell's contributions to the house-furnishing from those articles supplied by her sister. The stuffed armchairs, the flabby cushions, the podgy footstools, were assuredly Mrs. Gromwell's. The horsehair chairs, and the stiff green repp curtains, could belong to no one but Miss Eaves.

Although the day was mild, a large fire burned in the grate, and the one window was closely shut, a sand-bag successfully preventing the ingress of even a stray breath of air. The amalgamated

essence of many impalpable odours suggested that the bulky piece of furniture that resembled a glorified chiffonier acted as store-cupboard.

Entering direct from the freshness of the outer world, the guests gasped a little under the warmth of their reception. Mrs. Gromwell besought them to draw closer to the already too near fire. Miss Eaves announced that, as they were five minutes late, the tea that had been made at precisely ten minutes to four, and was keeping hot under a huge cosy, was just ready to serve, with the dish of toasted muffins that stood on the hearth.

The tea was strong—very strong, the cream was thick, the muffins oozed butter at every pore, the plum-cake was darkly rich ; but by order of her tyrant, poor Mrs. Gromwell's fare was restricted to brown bread and milky cocoa.

"Eliza has a very delicate digestion," remarked Miss Eaves, who was blissfully unconscious that by inference she assumed her guests to have the assimilating powers of the ostrich. "She is still suffering for her indulgence at your house on Christmas Day."

"But she ate nothing rich then. Scarcely anything at all, indeed, except a slice of turkey," protested Mrs. Penderby.

"Turkey is *very* rich," pronounced Miss Eaves solemnly.

As she joined mechanically in the conversation, Frances's vagrant thoughts busied themselves with the matter nearest her heart. A sudden sense of relief followed close upon her determination to consult Russell himself.

"I shall ask him straightforwardly if there is any

reason why he and I should not be friends," she decided. "I know I can trust him to answer truthfully."

Returning with a jerk to her present surroundings, Frances found that the talk had drifted to the question of late marriages, a topic upon which both of her listeners appeared to hold strong opinions.

"No man could ever induce me to marry again," Mrs. Gromwell announced from amidst her encasement of shawls, in a tone whose complacency suggested that impatient suitors thronged her gates.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say *that*," Miss Eaves, perhaps because she had not yet abandoned hope of a union, thought it advisable to hedge. "But it would only be for a very good man *indeed* that I would give up my freedom."

"But many late marriages are extremely happy ones," interposed Frances, prompted thereto by a glimpse of Mrs. Penderby's downcast expression. "Don't you think that when people are a little older, and can read character, and know the world, they are far more likely to choose wisely?"

"My point is," said Miss Eaves, "that if a woman is well enough off to live comfortably alone, she is a fool if she risks losing her happiness by bringing a strange man into her life. Eliza, do you remember that poor Mrs. Tillets that we met in the boarding-house at Torquay? Well——"

The subject proved a vital one. It galvanized even torpid Mrs. Gromwell into life. By the time that Miss Eaves had finished adorning her tale with modern instances, the hour had arrived when the



guests could, without disrespect to their hostess, take leave.

"Oh!" exclaimed Frances, drawing a long breath of relief when they had reached the open air. "What hours, and hours, and *hours*, we seem to have been shut up in that stuffy parlour! Were you not longing to get free? I was."

Mrs. Penderby's reply was a moment in coming. When it came it was irrelevant to the query.

"Frances—you don't think me very foolish—do you? An old woman like me thinking of marrying again?"

"I ought to feel old, I know," she said, when Frances had reassured her, "but I don't feel it. Do you know, dear, if I thought anybody ever guessed how young I feel, I would be quite ashamed!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The lamp was already lit in her sitting-room when Frances reached home. As she walked up the path she noticed that no answering light illumined the windows of the adjoining house.

On the table lay a note in a large square envelope. She was examining the writing curiously when Mrs. Lett bustled in.

"Miss Mithen's gentleman brought it, Miss, just when he was leaving to get the last train. He had called in the afternoon twice, but I couldn't tell him when you'd be back. And he brought the note just when his luggage was being taken out. Summoned away very sudden he were—by telegram."

"I regret exceedingly that I must leave Budcombe without personally thanking you for your thoughtful kindness to me—a stranger. On my

return to England I shall seek—and find—the first possible opportunity of telling you how very greatly I have appreciated your action.”

The name that followed was the scarce decipherable scrawl of a writer whose signature through frequent repetition has become illegible.

That was all, and he had gone—away from England. If only she had obeyed the warning her inexplicable reluctance sought to teach, and stayed at home that afternoon! But it was too late now. What was done could not be undone. He had gone. Her question must remain unanswered.

Throwing up the window, Frances leant out. Overhead a star twinkled feebly, but the murmur of the cobble-stones, as the tide moved them gently to and fro on the beach, had gained a new note—a note of sadness.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SCOTCH MIST

**T**IME undoubtedly works wonders, but it works them exceeding slowly.

With Russell's promise to return ever present in her mind, Frances found the spring and summer slip past leaving it yet unfulfilled.

He had spoken, in his note, of coming to see her on his return to England, and at first, with the happy confidence of a sanguine temperament, she had assured herself that his being out of England in all probability meant nothing further than a journey across the Channel, and that she might expect his return in a fortnight, or at latest a month.

Now he seemed to have slipped out of the recollection of every one but herself. Even Admiral Wyon had apparently forgotten the existence of his bugbear. When he heard of Russell's sudden departure from Budcombe, Wyon's satisfaction that events had proved the correctness of his conjecture was unbounded.

"If there is one thing I might pride myself on more than another, it is my skill in reading faces. I would have known that man to be a scoundrel even although he had worn royal robes," he declared triumphantly. "So he has taken his departure? I thought we wouldn't be long honoured with his

company after he knew I had discovered who he was. But I did think he would have brazened it out a day or two longer. Well, I suppose that is the last we may expect to hear of our friend !”

So far as Admiral Wyon was concerned, the episode might be considered closed, but Frances was not content ; until Russell's innocence was proved she knew she would not feel satisfied.

“ If only he were here to refute the charges,” she sometimes sighed ; but the early months of the new year were on without bringing news of his whereabouts.

“ He will come when the sloe blossom is out,” she had told herself. But when the spring winds blew snell even in the sheltered valley, and the brave white florets covered the hedgerows like a snowdrift, Frances wisely moved her time limit a stage further on. Advising herself that he might have voyaged to America, she promised that when the orchards were in bloom he would return. But the rosy bloom of apple was succeeded by the green beginnings of fruit, and still there was no sign of him.

April had brought the local excitement of Mrs. Penderby's wedding. The occasion once over, save for the appearance of a new orchid house at the foot of the garden and the presence of a new master at the head of the table, the pleasant home-life of the Eyrie knew little visible change.

No false sense of delicacy prevented the bride's accustomed mention of her former spouses, though Mr. Frew, who was a man of exact methodical mind, wisely taught his wife how to avoid any probable

confusion by speaking of the departed gentlemen as "my first husband, and my second."

He himself, when referring to his wife's former lords, spoke of them collectively and solemnly as "my predecessors." Frances believed that she alone enjoyed the humour of the appellation, until one day she surprised the accompanying twinkle in his shrewd Scottish eyes. Thereafter she loved Mr. Frew as a kindred spirit.

Her second summer at the Devon coast town Frances found distinctly less exhilarating than had been the first. The novelty that had lent charm even to the simplest of pleasures was succeeded by a stultifying sense of vain repetition. Though even to herself she refused to confess it, the feeling of ungratified expectancy that during the past six months had haunted her had robbed life of some of its savour.

As the weeks wore on, and residents fleeing sun-baked Budcombe jostled the incoming visitors who had journeyed thither in quest of cool sea air, Frances found herself regarding with a sense of keen refreshment her engagement to join the Chauncerys in the middle of August at the place they had taken on the Thames. Meanwhile the sun beat relentlessly on the roof of the little house on the Parade, and the intervening weeks stretched parched and breathless before her.

It was with a feeling of swift relief that she accepted an invitation to accompany the Frews on a tour in Scotland. Mr. Frew, as became a good patriot, yearned to reveal the glories of his native country to his wife, and his had been the kindly

suggestion that Frances should be asked to go with them.

"Mind you, I won't guarantee the weather," Frew, desirous to discount any possible disappointment, had warned them. "It's sure to be colder in the Highlands than it is so far south, and we might get some rain."

"After this tiresome heat we would delight in a cold wet day," Mrs. Frew and Frances had agreed with enthusiasm. A sun-baked human frame demands and welcomes rain as eagerly as does the parched soil. It was with intense physical enjoyment that they inhaled long invigorating draughts of the fresh northern air. And although at times the climate might seem moister than necessity or even expedience demanded, still, as Frances said, mere ordinary commonplace sunshine would not have suited the grandeur of the scenery nearly so well.

During the first days of the trip the quick succession of interests had done Frances good service in excluding from her mind all thought of her tantalizing neighbour. The stimulant of the vital air brought back the heat-banished colour to her cheeks, the brightness to her blue eyes, the blitheness to her view of all created things.

One misty afternoon early in August, as they were steaming slowly up the Caledonian Canal, Frances, wrapped in a voluminous plaid, sat alone on the deserted deck of the little steamer. Mr. and Mrs. Frew were playing chess in the saloon. Almost alone with Nature, Frances was glorying wholeheartedly in the elusive glimpses of giant mountains caught through their enwrapping scarves of mist,

when, without the slightest apparent reason for her sudden change of feeling, she became conscious of an intense longing to be back at Budcombe. The feeling was much akin to the intense desire to be at home that she had experienced on the afternoon when Russell had called in her absence to bid her good-bye.

Could it be possible that at the moment that she was so far away he had returned to seek her? That after all, he had come only to find her gone? "No, no," she counselled herself. "If Mr. Russell had really intended to come back, he would have come long ago. Or written—it would have been so easy to write. No, he has long ago forgotten that there is such a place as Budcombe."

But even while Frances assured herself that it was merely a foolish notion of hers—a hysterical fancy that must be rigorously discouraged—tears of impotence filled her eyes, and, brimming over, mingled with the Scotch mist that lay like a delicate dewy veil on her cheeks.

"Suppose he has called, and suppose he has had to leave without seeing you," argued her stronger self severely. "Why should it matter to you? What are you to him, or he to you? Nothing. Nothing at all, less than nothing."

With a sudden realization that the down-dropping mist had entirely blotted out the mountains, and that she was damp and chilly, Frances, rising with a sigh, went down to the saloon.

## CHAPTER XXVII

SIR STEPHEN RUSSELL, K.C.B.

THE Scottish tour ended, Frances accompanied her friends back to London, where they parted, the Frews returning to Devon, Frances journeying up the Thames valley to pay her promised visit to the Chauncerys.

When she alighted at the little wayside station, Frances found no one on the platform to meet her: no sign of waiting vehicle save a weather-beaten fly whose driver, evidently hopeless of securing a fare, was dozing placidly on the box.

"I expected a carriage to meet me. I am going to Riversdale," she explained.

The name of Riversdale appeared to galvanize the station-master into interest. Reluctantly acknowledging that no conveyance from Riversdale had yet arrived, he optimistically prophesied the appearance of one at any moment. Urging Frances to rest in the shade meanwhile, he dispatched the sluggish porter to look if anything was in sight on the dusty high road.

When five minutes had elapsed, Frances resolved to take the fly. The drowsy driver aroused, her traps and herself disposed about the dusty cushions, they set off on the two-mile drive to Riversdale.

The bracing influence of her Scottish tour had stimulated Frances both mentally and physically.



She was prepared to enjoy everything, to think the best of everybody. Had she been disposed to take a gloomy view of the situation, she might have thought Cynthia was offering a chilly welcome to her poor relation. As it was, she sensibly decided that either the telegram she had sent to announce the hour of her arrival had gone astray, or that, as the Chauncerys were probably entertaining a house-party, no carriage had been at liberty to fetch her.

It was the hottest hour of a breathless August day. The sun's rays beating unblushingly down seemed to concentrate themselves upon the white road between the high banks whose herbage was smothered in chalky dust.

At length the fly ceased crawling and stopped before a gate set in a tall box-hedge, and Frances, alighting, rejoiced that she had no farther to go.

Riversdale, after the custom of all self-respecting waterside residences, stood with its back to the road, its face to the Thames. Walking round the end of the house in search of some one to help with her luggage, Frances got a refreshing glimpse of a wide green lawn surrounded by flower-borders, stretching down to the cool tree-shaded water.

It was the lazy hour. No one was visible. The hall door stood open, but smitten by a sudden fear lest on entering she might find herself an intruder in a strange house, Frances discreetly paused on the threshold, and rang the bell.

She had just made herself known to the maid who appeared, when Cynthia's thin high voice, pitched in a note of relief, sounded from the upper landing.

"Is that you, Fanny? I'm here. Do come right up."

"Can anybody help the fly-man with my luggage?"

"The fly! Didn't the Trents' car meet you? How ridiculous! It must have broken down again. Woods, get the gardener to carry Miss Grant's things upstairs, and bring another cup up to my room."

"Mason Trent and Nannie went to meet you," Cynthia explained, when they were seated in her room at tea. "They left ages ago, but they had first to go to Bygrave to get a prescription made up. Mrs. Trent thought she had caught a chill. It is really nothing but a stiff neck, but I can tell you she has kept us all busy. Thank goodness she's asleep just now, and I'm getting a moment's peace. She couldn't have made more fuss if her head had been cut off. And after Nannie and Mason had started, Ellaline discovered that she had given them the wrong prescription, and I had to send Gunter after them in the pony-cart. And he has not come back either, and I hate to have a maid open the door. Just the day I require him most, too. It always happens like that."

Mrs. Chauncery's room was cool and shaded. The loose muslin tea-gown she wore gave an impression of airy restfulness, but her manner was full of badly suppressed irritation. Evidently Mrs. Mason Trent was a thorn in the flesh of her one-time bosom friend.

"Cynthia—I did not expect to meet the Trents. You said you——"

"Yes. I know I said I wouldn't invite them this

autumn, but Tom insisted upon having them. He said that when Sir Stephen was to be with us he would expect to meet his relatives."

"Is Sir Stephen Russell here?"

"Oh, yes. I forgot you didn't know. If you hadn't been wandering about Scotland, I'd have written to tell you." An expression of pleased expectancy had chased the querulousness from Cynthia's face. Sir Stephen was evidently a favourite of hers. "He returned to England nearly three weeks ago, and he has been with us most of the time. He had to go up to the War Office yesterday, but I expect him to come down with Tom to-night. You would read of his fresh laurels?"

"Yes, even in Budcombe news of his glories reached us. Is the great warrior as shy as ever?"

But to her cousin's surprise, the attribute that Mrs. Chauncery had previously denounced as awkward bashfulness she now professed to admire as graceful modesty. When Cynthia Chauncery was disposed to admire any one, she praised them in season and out of season until the human hearts of her hearers naturally turned against the impossibly perfect absentees. Before she could escape to rid herself from the dust of travel, Frances was forced to listen to an exaggerated account of Sir Stephen's prowess and personal charms.

Mrs. Chauncery so long delayed showing her guest to her room, that Frances, who felt unwilling that Mason Trent should see her dusty and travel-stained, at length asked to be permitted to go there.

When she saw the chamber allotted to her, Frances understood the nature of Cynthia's hesitancy.

The room, which was poky and low-roofed, overlooked the stable-yard. The one narrow window faced due west, and the evening sun beat fiercely upon it. The cheap enamelled furniture, the plain iron bed, the unornamented white ware all proclaimed it what it was—a servant's bedroom. The big spray of crimson-rambler roses Nannie had put in a vase on the dressing-table were already drooping in the heat.

"I simply hate to be obliged to ask you to put up with this. But I really cannot manage otherwise," Cynthia explained (though she omitted to mention that on account of the heat, Mrs. Trent's maid had objected to occupy the room; but then, as Cynthia said in excusing the arrangement to herself: "Fanny is always so unselfish, she will put up with anything.") "This house is very disappointing. It looks large, but the appearance is most deceptive. All the space is in the sitting-rooms. You would hardly believe it, but there are only three decent-sized bedrooms. I was obliged to give Sir Stephen the one I had intended for you. I could scarcely have expected the people's hero to tolerate *this*. Could I? And the room Nannie has is not much better."

There was yet no news of the motor party, but twenty minutes later, when Frances, feeling fresh and cool in a soft creamy India muslin with a great cluster of Nannie's roses stuck in her waist-belt, was descending the stairs, Mason Trent entered the hall.

Her first impression was that he looked older—careworn. Apowdering of chalk-dust lent an untimely

tinge of grey to his sleek hair. Before he caught sight of her, Frances surprised two upright fretfullines on his forehead. His former expression of self-complacent serenity had vanished, chased away by a look of restless dissatisfaction. He carried a chemist's parcel. Beyond, in the outer porch, Nannie was wrestling with voluminous veiling.

"Then you did get here all right," Trent said, recovering himself quickly, and advancing. "We were so sorry to be too late. First of all we were detained at Bygrave; then, in trying to make up for lost time, the motor broke down. I trust you suffered no inconvenience?"

"Oh, Frances—you darling!" screamed Nannie, rushing upon her friend like a whirlwind wreathed in gauze. "I didn't know it was you. I thought it was mother! Those silly veils make one so blind. How did you get here without us? I hope you hadn't to take that mouldy fly?"

"I got here beautifully, though the fly must have lost its wings, for it could only crawl."

"We were coming to meet you in the Trent's motor, but it bucked. I do believe Pochard does it on purpose. Just to get taking it back to town for repairs that it doesn't require. It is always all right in town. Is it not, Mr. Trent?"

"It certainly does not go wrong in town, but perhaps the condition of the country roads——"

Trent's judicial reply was interrupted by the bland voice of the invalid's maid.

"Mrs. Trent would like to see you, sir. I was to ask if you'd kindly go up at once, sir."

As she turned away to help Nannie to take off

her veil, Frances felt assured that never again would she shrink from the prospect of meeting Mason Trent. Their interview, momentary though it was, had served to convince her that he could never satisfy her now : that she had attained a higher ideal.

"Why, Nannie! How grown-up you look! You are quite a young lady," Frances made involuntary exclamation when she saw Nannie divested of her wraps. When they had last met, Nannie Chauncery had been a school-girl with her hair down and her skirts up. Now her hair was up and her skirts down.

"Oh, Frances, do you really think me grown-up looking? I do so wish to be grown-up. Sir Stephen Russell is here," she added, with apparent inconsequence. "He and father are coming down together in time for dinner. They won't be here for a while yet. Let us go to the kitchen-garden and see if any of the peaches are ripe."

As Mrs. Chauncery was resting until she would be called upon to entertain her illustrious guest, and Mrs. Trent absorbed her husband's attention, the two girls wandered alone in the walled garden, eating early peaches and pinching the plums to see if they were getting soft. And all the while Nannie prattled artlessly of Sir Stephen. There was no doubt that he was now her hero. Boredom was in imminent danger of succeeding Frances's amusement when a message recalled Nannie indoors.

Left alone, Frances sauntered about the grounds, well content. Her position as an inferior guest in no way troubled her. Under the trees by the river it was shady and fresh and fragrant. And in such sultry weather to be ignored was less exhausting

than to be made much of. She intended dining in her soft lace-trimmed muslin. Cynthia, who was so punctilious about dress, had said it would do nicely.

Frances was ashamed to find that in her most secret heart she was already beginning to despise the much-belauded warrior. A very little more of Cynthia's eulogy, of Nannie's gush, would, she feared, make her positively detest Mason Trent's half-brother, whom she mentally pictured as Mason's prototype.

She was resting on a rustic seat by the river when she heard her name called, and glancing round saw Tom Chauncery approaching across the grass. Her host was always a particular favourite of hers. Jumping up, Frances greeted him warmly.

"Well, Fan? And how has the world been using you?" Tom, his straw hat pushed to the back of his head, regarded her critically. "You're looking a different girl now. Got your colour back, and your old smile. Tell me, Fan——" his voice had dropped to a whisper. "You've quite forgotten? You don't object to meeting—eh?"

At the affectionate concern in his voice, Frances laughed outright.

"If these mysterious questions have any reference to Mason Trent, Tom, I can truthfully assure you that I began to forget him the moment I discovered what manner of man he was. He is nothing to me now. Less than nothing, indeed. But tell me, have you succeeded in bringing your extra special guest here safely?"

"Yes. He's here! We came down together

on the 4.18." Chauncery was closely examining the stump of his cigar before throwing it into the water. "You have never seen him—have you?"

"No. I haven't yet had the pleasure of being presented to the popular idol, but I can imagine him. He is an older, or an earlier, edition of his brother, dotted with medals and surmounted with a halo. Confess that I am right."

"Admirable!" Chauncery agreed gravely. "Most admirable. Couldn't possibly be improved upon. I imagine the resplendent being ought to be nearly visible now. Come in and be ready to do obeisance before him when he appears."

"It is so sweet and cool here. Don't let us go in before we must," Frances pled; and they lingered idly watching the passing boats till a flash of pink crossing the lawn indicated the approach of Nannie.

"Father, mother says if you won't dress for dinner you might at least change your coat. It isn't respectful to us not to."

"Father never will dress for dinner in the country." As she made the protest Nannie's chubby face was grave with an evident sense of personal grievance, a half-echo of Cynthia's querulous tone made peevish her clear young voice. "Mother says how can she possibly ask the proper people to meet Sir Stephen if father always refuses to dress. There are so many nice people living about here, and quite a lot of them have called, especially since Sir Stephen came."

"My sweet child, don't you realize that this is my holiday?" expostulated Tom, with imperturbable good nature. "For ten months in the year I am



willing to sit up and look pretty and prattle nicely ; but during August and September I claim the right to be as untidy and ugly and cross and glum as I please. If the nice people want to dine with my dress-suit, I'll send it to them with pleasure. Or if they like to wait and dine with us after we get home, they'll have the added gratification of seeing me in it."

"Father is horrid," pouted Nannie. "And I'm sure the gong must have sounded. They will be waiting for us."

"I must prepare my best curtsey," Frances said, as they strolled towards the house.

In company with her two male guests, Cynthia awaited them in the hall, that, by the aid of sundry seats, tables and screens, she had contrived to transfer into the distant semblance of a sitting-room. Riversdale boasted adorable reception-rooms that opened wide French windows to the sunshine and the river. Unfortunately Cynthia's fiction-reading had imbued her with the notion that the life of a country-house that has any pretensions to smartness invariably centres in the hall. So in the Riversdale hall, which in addition to being dark, noisy and draughty, had that lack of seclusion peculiar to thoroughfares, she condemned her guests to sit. To do Mrs. Chauncery justice, she shared their penance.

As Frances entered, peering a little in the effort to distinguish faces in the gloom, for her eyes were still dazzled with the glories of the sunset, Cynthia advanced to meet her, all jingling sauvity.

"I thought you people were never coming in. Fan, dear, let me make you and a very special

friend of ours known to each other—Sir Stephen Russell—Miss Grant.”

Frances was bowing mechanically in the direction of the dimly-seen great man, when he stepped forward with outstretched hand. Laying her hand in his with a murmured “How d’ye do,” Frances found her hand caught and held in a firm nervous clasp, so unlike the customary shake that she glanced up in surprise, to encounter the gaze, half apologetic, half shy, of her one-time next-door neighbour.

“How careless Gunter is! He never seems to realize that the nights are drawing in already, and that we require lamps before dinner. “I’m sure you and Sir Stephen can scarcely see each other,” Cynthia was protesting.

But two of her guests were grateful for the friendly mirk that they owed to the omission of the careless Gunter.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### UNDER ONE ROOF

**T**HE unlooked-for appearance of one whose promised return she had almost ceased to anticipate, plunged Frances into a state as nearly approaching stupefaction as is possible to a well-bred maiden. But though the soul of Frances was momentarily moidered, her admirably trained body continued mechanically to perform its accustomed duties.

The dinner began with fish. Tom Chauncery, who, since the rigorously enforced diet of childhood, had cherished a wholesome dislike of soup, absolutely refused to have it served during his holiday. "An absurd sense of propriety compels me to pretend to eat soup all the rest of the year, but nothing will induce me to tolerate it during my vacation," he declared. And Cynthia, as in all matters where her husband took a decided stand, being obliged to conform to his expressed wish, the dinner began with fish. Frances ate prettily and used the proper implements, though she had no notion of what she was eating, nor indeed had she a clear conception that she was eating at all. For the first few minutes all that she was conscious of was a confused sense of relief that, as she and Sir Stephen were seated as far apart as the table-arrange-

ment of the small company allowed, they had no present need for speech.

Cynthia, who was exerting herself to please her most honoured guest, had no attention to spare for her cousin. Nannie Chauncery, who sat between her father and Sir Stephen, neglected her dinner to gaze with rapt admiration at the soldier.

Mason Trent, who separated Frances from her hostess, tended to her further distraction by keeping up a stream of polite conversation, to which Frances, who was trying to get reason out of her mental chaos, found it vexatious to be forced to reply.

So her maligned neighbour—the subject of Admiral Wyon's denunciation—and Sir Stephen, the hero of half a dozen campaigns, were one and the same. But why?—and why?—and why? Frances kept asking herself the while Trent's carefully modulated voice murmured platitudes in her intolerant ear. "If only he would keep silent and let me think!" she kept wishing.

Prompt reply to her unuttered prayer arrived in the form of a message brought by Mrs. Trent's maid and transmitted though the medium of Gunter—

"Would Mr. Trent kindly step upstairs? Mrs. Trent did not think she felt so well."

Trent, without visible indication of irritation at the peremptory summons which reached him with the entrées, rose at once to obey it. Sir Stephen's presence prevented any criticism of the invalid's exactions, but although Mrs. Chauncery's voice uttered quite civil phrases regarding Mrs. Trent's health, her expression gave utterance to a perfectly audible "Tush!" of annoyance at the selfish

woman who, for the gratification of her silly fancies, did not hesitate to sacrifice the comfort of everybody else.

Mason gone, Tom Chauncery claimed Frances's attention. Cynthia and Nannie had turned their united persuasive batteries upon their chief guest with the object of inducing him to promise to take a leading part in the opening of a new rifle range at Monk Stenton, half a dozen miles distant. And under cover of their voluble appeal, Tom turned to Frances; "Well?" he asked.

As, looking up, she encountered his kindly quizzical gaze, Frances saw that his grey eyes twinkled with the humour of the secret that his firm mouth had not betrayed.

"Oh, Tom, you knew!"

She spoke reproachfully, and Chauncery wisely did not affect to misunderstand her meaning.

"Yes," he agreed quietly. "I knew."

"All the time?"

"Yes. All the time," he acknowledged, with a smile.

"But, Tom, I don't understand the meaning——"

"It is quite simple. He was asked to write the official account of the Alfongoga campaign. It was just after his return, and people were bent on fêting him. Finding he could not get peace to write in London, he spoke of going off to some quiet place where nobody would know him. I suggested the rooms Nannie and I had lived in at Budcombe, and he engaged them as Mr. Russell because he didn't want his work interrupted. That's the whole story."

"Not quite the whole story," Frances thought.  
"Tom, did you tell him I was there?"

"No."

"Never even said I was living next door?"

"Never even mentioned your existence."

Frances opened bewildered eyes.

"Why didn't you?"

Chauncery's smile was enigmatical as he replied—  
"There was only a low hedge between you, my dear. And as I knew that you had both got eyes in your heads, I left you to find each other out!"

But it is extremely difficult for two people to talk confidentially at a small table that contains three other diners. Cynthia, suddenly becoming conscious of the presence of Frances, besought her to add her solicitations to those of Nannie and herself respecting the opening of the Monk Stenton rifle range.

Urged thereto, Frances, with burning cheeks and downcast eyes, emitted a stumbling statement that might be accepted as meaning that she hoped Sir Stephen would gratify the people by granting their request. Whereupon Sir Stephen, somewhat to the surprise of Mrs. Chauncery and Nannie, closed the discussion without further demur, by pledging his word to perform the required ceremony.

"Mason did not return to finish dinner," Frances said. "Mrs. Trent must be very ill."

Cynthia and she were seated in the hall. Nannie had lingered in the dining-room on the pretext of lighting her father's cigar.

"Ill? Nonsense. I have no patience with her vapours. She ate an excellent dinner. I saw it

sent up before ours was served, hoping that she might allow us to eat our meal in peace. But Ellaline always takes the most inconvenient times to feel bad. She kept poor Mason out all afternoon in the heat and dust, and prevented us sending to meet you. And now she must interrupt his dinner! Mason made an appalling bargain when he married her. Though she has lots of money she is such a drag on an ambitious man. Did you hear that Mason had the offer of joining the embassy at St. Petersburg and she made him refuse it? Said the doctors told her the climate would kill her. Of course they don't want to banish such a good paying patient! Now Mason is just eating his heart out, spending his days in dancing attendance on her whims."

With the sound of a descending footstep, Mrs. Chauncery's derogatory remarks gave place to anxious inquiries.

"Oh, it is you, Mason! I hope Ellaline is no worse. Was the pain troubling her again?"

"Yes. She can't move her head without pain. She fears it may be some threatening of meningitis. She is sure she is feverish, and wishes me to fetch a doctor. Didn't you say one lived near the village?"

"Yes, in the square house on this side of the church. Coleman, I think his name is. How will you get there? I'm afraid the gardener who looks after our pony has gone home, and your chauffeur lives in the village."

"Oh, I'll walk. It isn't far. The doctor will probably drive me back."

"But won't you finish dinner first? Gunter had orders to keep something hot for you."

"No, I have eaten sufficiently, thank you. Could you see Ellaline? She is rather nervous about herself. If Elton Baggs had not been in Switzerland, she would have telegraphed for him."

"Poor Mason! I expect he hopes to walk off his impatience," commented Cynthia sagely when Mason, having slipped a light top-coat over his evening dress, had departed. "How she must get on his nerves! What an appalling disappointment his marriage must have been to him! But one thing that I must confess I admire about Mason Trent is that he'd rather die than show it. Well, as a dutiful hostess, I suppose I must go up and listen to Ellaline's melancholy piffle. Somebody told me Dr. Coleman has no sympathy with neurotic patients. I do hope he gives Ellaline a good scolding. Tiresome woman!"

Left alone in the hall, Frances turned over the leaves of *The Graphic* with fingers that trembled with excitement. As she regarded its pages with unseeing eyes, she told herself that Sir Stephen had acted dishonourably in accepting her hospitality whilst permitting her to remain in ignorance of his real position, and tried to school her fluttering pulses to calm their agitation enough to enable her to receive him with proper dignity. She assured herself that she must treat him with a courteous stand-offishness of deportment until he offered a satisfactory explanation of the misleading position he had chosen temporarily to assume.

But at the moment when a sound of movement showed that the men were leaving the dining-room, and the desired interview appeared imminent, the



last remnant of her courage vanished, and leaving the hall she slipped out through the open door, and stood outside the porch in the perfumed dusk of the summer night.

An echo of voices, the odour of cigars, a moment of hesitancy, during which Frances held her breath, then Sir Stephen stepped out, and crossing the shaft of light that emerged from the open porch door, stood in the deep shadow beside her.

For a full minute they were silent. He was conscious that he had much to say that it would interest Frances to hear, but he was a man of few words, and now the difficulty lay in the beginning. Then, as the silence threatened to become awkward, Frances, urged to speech partly by the fear that did she continue dumb, her companion might guess her inward perturbation, and partly by a courteous desire to set him at ease, hazarded a remark.

"How sweet the world smells to-night," she said softly. "Did you ever notice that on very dark nights, such as this, the air always seem more fragrant than on moonlight nights? I often noticed it at St. Hertha. I wonder why it is."

Before replying Russell waited a moment as though deeply considering the matter.

"Perhaps the fact of our eyes not being in actual use may render our sense of smell more acute," he at length replied gravely, speaking with due deliberation, as though that question and no other dominated his mind. "The subject is a most interesting one. I have never before heard the point raised."

"Oh, dear, dear!" thought Frances impatiently. "I wonder if we are going to go on talking like this

for ever, and I don't really care a pin-head about the matter! How silly of me it was to begin speaking at all. I should have left it to him to introduce a topic of conversation. Now he'll think I don't want to refer to what happened at Budcombe, and I do—desperately."

"Sir Stephen"—there was a plaintive note in Nannie's voice as her pink-clad figure appeared in the doorway of the porch—"won't you come in for your game of *béziq*ue? The table is all ready, and I've been waiting ever so long."

"How like ghosts you people were!" she commented, as without a word they turned to go in, "standing there motionless in the dark. I could only see your white frock, Frances, and Sir Stephen's shirt-front; all the rest of you was nearly invisible. It made me feel quite creepy!"

The remainder of the evening passed quickly enough. Chauncery played the peculiarly aggravating species of patience with which he chose to enliven his leisure. It was his own adaptation, and he had christened it the "Brain-Racker Patience." Cynthia grumbled in an undertone to Frances, who listened with half an ear, while she looked across the hall to the corner table where Nannie Chauncery and Sir Stephen were playing *béziq*ue. From where she sat she saw Nannie's eager face and dimpled neck as the light fell full upon them, and the silhouette of her partner's clean-cut head set firmly upon his square shoulders.

Mason Trent's neck, she remembered, was thin. And no sartorial art, however distinguished, had ever quite concealed the fact that his shoulders sloped.

“ How could I ever imagine I loved a man who had a thin neck and soda-water-bottle shoulders ? ” Frances asked herself, without eliciting a satisfactory reply. She thereupon began trying to find points of physical similarity in the half-brothers, but was speedily obliged to abandon the quest, for, beyond an oddly elusive family resemblance that completely defied analysis and could be ascribed to neither feature, complexion nor manner, resemblance there was none. Had Frances known the story of their mother's different marriages, she would scarcely have marvelled at the dissimilarity of hersons.

Squire Russell of Ruffington Chase had been a typical Englishman, conservative, charitable, clean-living, and devoted to sport. He was close upon forty when he married a wife much younger than himself. Ten years later an accident in the hunting-field left Mrs. Russell a young widow with a comfortable competence, a son of eight years, and a full sense of her forlorn and interesting condition.

Avowing herself to perpetual widowhood and good works, Mrs. Russell decided to have her boy educated at home in order that, in the intervals of playing Lady Bountiful to the neighbourhood, she might personally superintend his education. She engaged a tutor, looked anxiously for traces of white in her thick brown hair, and bought a selection of fancy-baskets whose handles she adorned with large black crape bows.

But the baskets when filled were heavy to carry, the villagers were ungrateful, jealous of each other, and shockingly unpicturesque. The second summer after Squire Russell's death proved an unusually

hot one, and black is oppressive wear when the thermometer reaches the nineties. White muslin gradually usurped the place of the young widow's crape, and roses filled the baskets originally designed for the conveyance of tea and sugar.

The tutor was young, ambitious and not unattractive. He had a glib tongue, the knack of penning love-sonnets, and a keen eye for the main chance. A woman alone—especially a silly woman—is a very defenceless object, an easy prey to a plausible fortune-hunter. October saw him master at Ruffington Chase and little Stephen, his world of a sudden turned topsy-turvey, fighting his first battles, and winning them too, at school. A dozen years later a local epidemic of diphtheria, which claimed amongst its victims his mother and step-father, left Stephen Russell, then a subaltern, to act the part of guardian to his young half-brother.

Stephen had manfully accepted the trust. A tendency towards speculation on the part of the late Mr. Trent who, on no foundation whatever, imagined himself gifted with a genius for finance, had left the estate somewhat hampered. But Russell saw that his ward's education lacked nothing that could be esteemed desirable. And young Mason Trent, on his part, took full advantage of his opportunities, and showed himself thoroughly conscientious.

His school reports pronounced his conduct irreproachable. He was a regular correspondent. Throughout Stephen's long absences Mason did not miss a mail. His letters were well written, carefully expressed, and admirable in sentiment; but they always exactly filled a sheet of note-paper. Stephen.

leading a campaign in some arid land, or quelling native risings in some new possession, used to sigh when, after arduous journeyings, one of these blameless epistles reached him.

"If it wasn't so stereotyped! If one letter wasn't exactly like the others! If only the beggar would write a line more than his sheet of paper, or a line less, if he would only show me his true self, even if it were not an absolutely perfect self!" he used to think. "I would love him more."

Later, when he had won his laurels, and events brought him more frequently to England, he began to realize that Mason Trent had put nothing more into his letters simply because there was nothing more in himself to put there.

In most characteristics the two brothers were poles asunder. It was small wonder that Frances's keenest scrutiny found little likeness existent between them, either mentally or physically.

The excitement of the evening was the doctor's arrival, close followed by the satisfaction—to every one except Mrs. Mason Trent—of finding that he regarded the ailment from which his patient suffered as trivial. Then came candles, good-nights, a silent hand-clasp from Russell, and the day was ended.

"One whole night gone, and he has never even attempted to say a word of explanation," Frances sighed, as she lay down on the unyielding bed in her tiny airless chamber. "He must know how much I want him to tell me things. If he had really cared, surely he could have managed it. If I had been the man, I know I could!"

## CHAPTER XXIX

### WOES—REAL AND IMAGINARY

**A** CLATTER in the stable-yard underneath her window awoke Frances to a new day.

Rising and peeping cautiously out, she saw the groom-gardener harnessing the pony-cart, and remembered that Tom Chauncery had spoken of an important board meeting that would call him early to town.

The morning gave promise of a glorious day. The air flowing in at her open window was cool and sweet. Under its charmed influence Frances forgot the petty worries that had harassed her night, and remembered nothing save that the man in whom she felt most interest was under the same roof with her, and that the brave August day would be spent in his company.

With heart attuned to happiness, she put on a cool dress of black and white striped cambric and went downstairs to breakfast.

The gong sounded as she entered the dining-room, where Cynthia, Nannie and Mason Trent were already assembled. They were seated at table before Sir Stephen appeared. He received Mrs. Chauncery's jest about his being the only lazy one, with the information that he had been up early, and out for an hour.

"Did you go for a walk?" asked Nannie, who

between spoonfuls of Quaker oats was devouring her hero with her eyes.

"No, Nannie. I merely prowled about the grounds and the kitchen garden."

"Did you pick up a worm?" Frances asked, with a shy attempt at playfulness.

"No. I must confess to picking up nothing more useful than a ripe greengage."

"What a pity! The early worm would have been so valuable for Tom's fishing. Perhaps he might at last have caught something with it," commented Cynthia dryly.

So for a long hour he had strolled alone in the sweetness of the morning. Frances found it necessary to warn herself against the absurdity of supposing that he had gone there in the hope of seeing her.

It was disappointing to find that, even when on one of his rare holidays, inconvenient claims were made upon Sir Stephen's time. A pile of correspondence lay unopened by his plate. When breakfast was ended he gathered up his letters and, begging to be excused, disappeared.

"Now we shan't see Sir Stephen till luncheon-time. He always works in the library all morning," Cynthia remarked, when Russell had quitted the room and Trent had gone upstairs to give his exacting spouse the medicine she refused to take from any hand but his. "It is a shame he can't get peace to enjoy his leave. Nannie, run away and practise, before it gets too hot."

"Must I practise, mother? It's too hot to practise," pouted Nannie. "I'd rather go out to the garden."

"I dare say you would! And get your freckles back, after all the trouble I've had?" demanded Cynthia sternly. "Certainly not. Get your violin at once. It is quite cool in the drawing-room with the French shutters closed."

"Fanny, dear," she added suavely, when the reluctant Nannie had vanished to torture her long-suffering instrument, "I know you are not afraid of a little sun. Do you think you could cut the flowers for me this morning? Yes? That is good of you. All the glasses require to be refilled. Woods might do it, but she has a blouse to alter for Nannie. In this heat flowers droop at once. I would do it myself, but I must see cook, and that takes ages. And as I am going out in the afternoon, I must rest. And Nannie freckles so dreadfully with the least sun."

"How wonderfully Nannie's appearance has improved. She is looking quite pretty."

"Isn't she? You remember what a plain child she was. I used to despair of her turning out even passable. And what an object she looked when I got her away from school! I think it is the greatest possible mistake to let girls go in for games. Spoils their figures and ruins their skins completely. I'd be ashamed to tell you what Nannie's waist measurement was before I took her in charge. And her hands were quite knuckly and hard from using those dreadful hockey sticks. I had endless trouble before I got her fit to be looked at."

"Her appearance will be better taken care of at the school you spoke of sending her to at Versailles. When does she go?"

"Well, I don't know—I'm not certain if she need



go there at all," demurred Cynthia. "Nannie is seventeen now. Our grandmother married at seventeen," she added inconsequently.

"So did my mother. But I'm not sure that it's wise to marry too early. Anyhow, girls don't marry so soon nowadays."

"I don't see why they shouldn't," said Cynthia conclusively, rising. "You'll find the garden scissors in the sideboard drawer, and the big flower-basket is in the arbour. Gunter will see that all the vases are emptied in readiness for you."

Mrs. Chauncery's request was a command. So, her fair face shaded from the sun by a big muslin-lined straw hat, her slender hands protected from thorns and tan by long gloves, Frances cut and arranged flowers all through the bright hours. At first to stand by the shady borders of the old-fashioned garden, where fruit, flowers, and vegetables jostled each other in happy medley, was unalloyed pleasure. But as the sun rose higher and higher and the shade gradually diminished, Frances began to find her allotted task an actual burden. The fierce rays of the sun stung her shoulders through the thin cambric of her bodice. The shrill wail of Nannie's violin, which sounded like the despairing cry of some lost spirit, tortured her ears. Wasps and other winged insects fought boldly for the possession of the blossoms she was raiding. But still a dogged perseverance made her refuse to abandon the labour she had undertaken. It was luncheon-time before the last glass was filled, and she had barely time to remove her hat and smooth the hair that was damp and heavy with the heat, before sitting down to table.

Trent, who had journeyed to town with his host, had not yet returned, so Russell and the three women were alone.

Frances saw Sir Stephen glance anxiously at her ; but if Mrs. Chauncery noticed that her unimportant guest appeared flushed and tired, she discreetly refrained from calling attention to the fact, though she graciously lavished praise upon Frances's floral table-decoration, which consisted solely of leafless spikes of rosy-scarlet larkspur set in vases of chased silver.

"And is your work over for the day?" Cynthia inquired, turning gracefully towards Sir Stephen. "Are you free to go out motoring with us?"

"I shall be delighted," he answered readily. "When do we start? In half an hour? All right. I'll finish off the last of my budget, and then get ready at once."

The possibility of her own exclusion from the contemplated outing did not occur to Frances. After the extreme heat of the morning, the prospect of a swift motor run through the leafy river-side lanes seemed peculiarly attractive, and helped to banish her fatigue.

Hastening upstairs, she refreshed herself with cool water, and put on her white dress and the hat that was best suited to rapid transit. Then descending, she knocked at her hostess' bedroom door.

"Come in," Mrs. Chauncery replied. She was standing before a long mirror buttoning her loose silk dust-coat.

"Oh, it's you!" she said, without turning, as her cousin entered with an apology. "I thought it was Nannie. What a time that girl takes to dress."

"Can you lend me a motor veil?" Frances asked.  
"I am sorry I have no proper motor things."

Cynthia, turning sharply round, opened coldly astonished eyes at seeing Frances attired for driving. Frances intuitively felt that her cousin regarded her request as an impertinence.

"Oh, I didn't mean to bother you to come, Fanny. After being out in the heat all morning, I know you'll want to lie down."

"But I don't, really. I never lie down in the day. And I should love a cool spin in a motor." Frances could not bear to see her anticipated pleasure snatched from her grasp without making an effort to retain it.

"But there isn't room—oh, yes, I know Mason said it seated five, but it doesn't hold more than four comfortably. Besides, it looks ridiculous to see people squeezed in, as though this were their first and last earthly chance of a motor-drive and they were afraid to lose it. Besides, I must take Nannie. It isn't good for her to be indoors all day. And she has to be refitted for the frocks a little dressmaker at Bygrave is making for her. I am most anxious one should be ready for wear on Friday at the opening of the Rifle Range. If you take my advice you'll lie down and take a good rest, and be fresh at tea-time. You looked quite heated and blowsy at luncheon. I saw Sir Stephen look at you."

In that short interview Frances had made the discovery that a poor relation never clearly realizes that she is a poor relation until she accepts the hospitality of her richer kinsfolk. Two years earlier had she been Mrs. Chauncery's guest, nothing would

have been too much to offer her. Now, nothing was too little.

Probably some hint of this knowledge in her expression touched even the selfish heart of Mrs. Chauncery; for, following Frances as she turned silently to leave the room, she spoke more persuasively.

“I hate to disappoint you, Fan, but it will really be a favour to me if you stay at home. Nannie must get these frocks fitted—really she is in rags, positively in rags. And if I stayed at home, you and she could not go alone with Sir Stephen. Then it wouldn't do to leave Ellaline all by herself in the house. Mason would think it queer if he returned from town to find her still in bed—though there's nothing earthly wrong with her—and us all out. He might think we were neglecting Ellaline. Besides, Tom will expect somebody to be at home to pour out tea for him. And you were always a special favourite of his.”

As Frances, trying to choke down the lump that had arisen in her throat, and affecting not to notice the ache that had crept into her heart, was standing before her small clouded mirror slowly unfastening the hat that ten minutes earlier she had so gaily pinned on, she heard the warning note of the hooter, as the car swung out into the highway. From the window she caught a glimpse of its shining bulk as it flashed by. Mrs. Chauncery was seated by the chauffeur in front. Behind, Nannie raised adoring eyes to Sir Stephen.

Sitting down on the edge of her hard bed—which creaked protestingly—Frances bravely faced the situation. She did not cry. She was not a crying

woman, yet for a long moment she felt as though a good cry would have been an unspeakable relief. It was not Cynthia's cold-shouldering that affected her. She knew her cousin too well to expect her to be any other than selfish and self-seeking, and it is only those of whom we expect better things who have power to disappoint us. What really hurt her was the knowledge that, during the hours they had passed in the same house, Russell had made no attempt to speak alone with her—that he had sought no opportunity of referring to their previous acquaintance, or to the reasons attached to his incognito visit to Budcombe.

His conduct seemed to show clearly how much less their mutual experience of the previous winter had been to Sir Stephen than to herself. Ever since she had defended the threatened reputation of the unknown visitor, Frances had cherished a secret trust that he would keep his promise to return to visit her, at the little seaside town.

Now that they had at last met, with the welcome knowledge that her intuitive faith in his integrity had not been misapplied had come the infelicitous discovery that she was less than nothing to him. That for any reference he had made to the circumstances of their past acquaintance they might have met for the first time at Riversdale.

"But how silly of me this is!" she assured herself. "Moving about the world as he does, Sir Stephen must meet dozens and dozens of women. Why should I expect him to remember me particularly? What could a shabby-genteel woman living alone on a tiny income be to a man of his standing? If I

had occupied my former 'position we might have met on a more equal footing. But as it is——”

Frances could hardly be blamed for heaving a sigh after the fortune she had so recklessly distributed, as, jumping up from her uncomfortable seat, she got out her tea-basket and set about making herself a cup of tea.

She had been too hot at luncheon to eat, and the fragrant China tea was trebly refreshing. With the first sip Frances began to take a less gloomy view of life. As she poured out a second cup she found herself looking confidently to the future.

Drawn to the window by the sound of voices beneath, she saw Mrs. Trent's smart maid and the cook gossiping with the groom-gardener. The sight brought the knowledge that the invalid would be alone, and a recollection of Cynthia's request.

Pouring out a cup of tea, and taking the little biscuit-box that, as relic of the Scottish trip, contained some petticoat-tail shortbread, Frances carried them downstairs and knocked softly at Mrs. Trent's bedroom door.

“Come in,” a peevish voice replied. “Oh, it's you, Miss Grant! I thought everybody had gone out in the motor. I wish they had told me before they started. I wanted them to get some cotton-wool. I sent Dolling down, but she was too late. Now I suppose we will have to send specially to Bygrave for it.”

“I brought you a cup of tea. I thought you might fancy it, even though it is so early. I am so sorry you have been suffering.”

“I don't require to ask how you are,” Mrs. Trent

remarked enviously as she accepted the tea. "I heard you had come yesterday. How well you are looking! Evidently travel agrees with you. Now half a day's journey completely upsets me. How I envy you robust people who never have to think of weather or draughts, or anything. My heart is so weak that any extreme of either heat or cold affects my circulation instantly. I am really a human barometer. Sir Elton Baggs told me so. He said: 'Mrs. Trent, you are a most delicate instrument to handle. The very slightest atmospheric variation tells instantly upon your temperature. You are simply a human barometer!'"

"But you are a little better to-day, are you not? Cynthia said the pain was not so severe. I'm glad the local doctor was able to do some good."

"That wretched man! I wish I had never sent for him! The stuff he gave me may have helped the pain, but it has burnt the skin all off my neck. I shan't be able to wear a low dress for ages. And his manner was so coarse. I suppose he is accustomed to treat only country people who are all as strong as horses. And he was frightfully ignorant. I am convinced he could not take my temperature, or read my pulse correctly. When he said that the dreadful pain I felt was merely a crick in the neck, I saw at once how little he knew his business. When I told him I suffered agonies every time I attempted to move my head, what do you think he said? He said: 'My dear madam, if it hurts you to do so, then why attempt to move your head?' I have no faith in the remedies of a man who talks like that. If it hadn't been for that old prescription of Sir Elton

Baggs that I got made up, I'm certain I'd have been in for an attack of rheumatic fever, and that would have killed me. My heart would never have stood it!"

"It is good that you are really a little better to-day. Don't you think if you wrapped up well you might venture downstairs this afternoon?" Frances made gentle insinuation. "It will be so nice on the lawn, and everything is so dry, that there can be no chance of a chill. It is so difficult to regain strength in bed."

Mrs. Trent demurred. She was tired of bed; but her invalid reputation was too precious a possession to be lightly abandoned.

"If you're quite certain there is no danger of the weather changing, I might make an effort. But it would be very risky. Sir Elton Baggs warned me. He said: 'You are too careless about yourself, Mrs. Trent. You are always in far too great haste to recover from an illness. Let me impress upon you the necessity of making haste slowly.' I thought it such an expressive phrase 'make haste slowly'."

A knock at the door interrupted her platitudes.

"Oh, is that you at last, Mason? What ages you have been away. The others are all out in the motor enjoying themselves, I suppose." Mrs. Trent's querulous tone implied that their pleasure was a personal insult to herself. "If it hadn't been for Miss Grant, I should have been quite alone. Dolling went downstairs half an hour ago to refill my hot-water bag—I am always so chilly—and she has stayed *hours*. Gossiping, of course."

Crossing to the bell, Trent rang it sharply. Having come in directly from the sunshine, the dark airless



room with its mingled odours of eau-de-Cologne and embrocation awoke in him a strong feeling of aversion.

It annoyed him to find Frances with his wife. The contrast between them was peculiarly exasperating to his fastidious taste. Frances, her fresh young beauty clad in airy raiment, had the buoyant air of a daughter of the morning. Ellaline, a worsted shawl huddled about her shoulders, showed the flabby skin and fretful expression of a *malade imaginaire*. A sudden recollection of the tropical dawn by whose roseate light he had broken the news of her uncle's death to Frances, rushed upon him disturbingly. How young she had looked, just aroused from sleep, with her sunny hair rippling about her shoulders, her blue eyes wide with horror. . . . Trent's established tenet was faith in his own judgment. To be forced to remember that, having had it in his power to choose between the two women, he had selected Ellaline, galled him.

A hint of Trent's mortification intuitively communicated itself to Frances. Actuated by a feeling of sympathy, she rose at once to leave the room.

"Then you will try to come down for a little? I hope you will soon be quite strong again."

"I shall never be really robust," Mrs. Trent made doleful but resigned prognostication. "That very nice English physician that I consulted at Nice last spring (do you remember his name, Mason?) told me so. He said: 'Any one seeing you, and feeling your thready little pulse, could tell at once that you weren't strong, that you never had been strong, and that you never would be strong!'"

## CHAPTER XXX

### HER BESETTING VICE

THE motor party returned about six o'clock, to find Frances and Mrs. Trent seated amicably by the tea-table on the lawn. Frances, whose sweet nature cherished no malice, was genuinely pleased to welcome their return. She expressed the hope, in all sincerity, that they had enjoyed the drive, and hastened to supply them with tea.

Her afternoon had not been spent in idleness, nor had been that of Mason Trent. The instalment of Mrs. Trent in the most luxurious of the garden chairs had entailed considerable trouble to both. Frances, who had amply furnished it with cushions in readiness for her coming, had foolishly imagined she had done all that was necessary to ensure the well-being of the invalid. Mason, who had conducted his wife thither, fondly believed his labour ended.

But Mrs. Trent, who was herself the soul of indolence, owned in perfection the art of keeping her companions employed. First the chair had to be placed in the shade, as she feared the sun was too hot. Then it had to be removed to the sun because she feared the shade was too cold. Then a mat had to be fetched, for although no rain had fallen for weeks, and the soil was positively cracking for lack of moisture, Mrs. Trent was suspicious of

damp. Then she required an extra cushion because the seat of her chair was too low, and finally demanded a footstool because it was too high.

Tom Chauncery, who had arrived about five o'clock glorying in the anticipation of a succession of days of unbroken leisure, had, after a hasty tea, set off in the skiff for Bygrave, to secure something he required for the fishing expedition he had planned for the morrow. Thinking it a duty to remain with Mrs. Trent, Frances had refused to accompany him. Mason Trent went instead, as Mrs. Trent still yearned for the cotton-wool.

Sir Stephen, arriving dusty and thirsty from an excursion that he was vexed to be forced to believe Frances had not cared to join, thought her looking especially lovely as she sat where the declining sun cast flickering shadows athwart the grass. To the wanderer there was something peculiarly homelike and reposeful in the return to the cool sweetness of the riverside lawn, and to the gracious woman who awaited them by the tea-urn.

Having paused to make a polite inquiry for the health of his sister-in-law, Russell placed himself beside Frances. Nannie, as was her custom, seated herself as close to him as a chair could conveniently go. Cynthia was glancing through some letters that had arrived by the afternoon post, while she made a pretence of listening to Mrs. Trent's prattle.

"Do you feel quite rested now?" he asked, as Frances handed him a cup of tea.

"I? I wasn't tired!" Frances was surprised into saying.

"But I was told—at least I understood—you refused to accompany us because you wished to lie down."

"Oh, Cynthia, Cynthia!" Frances shook her head mentally over this example of her cousin's perfidy. But all she said was: "I really did rest, though I didn't care to lie down."

She was oddly gratified to know that he had noticed her absence, and to be able to think that he had missed her.

"Had you a very charming run?" she asked. "It must have been a long one."

"We covered a lot of ground certainly," he acknowledged. "The sun was hot, and the roads were very dusty." Though out of courtesy to his hostess Sir Stephen did not exactly say so, Frances gathered that he would not have objected to spend the sultry afternoon quietly in the grounds. "How sweet and cool it is here."

"Yes. Isn't it delightfully refreshing? Tom was saying he regards the river as his own special refrigerator."

"Some of the coast places must be fiercely hot at this season" said Sir Stephen.

"Yes. Especially the Devon coast. Dear little Budcombe catches every ray of sunshine. And if it has the privilege of basking in the sun all winter, it pays for it by broiling in it all August."

"Budcombe does look different just now. With the bathing-boxes on the Parade and all those no-hatter visitors about."

"Why, Sir Stephen," Nannie broke in interestedly, "I never knew you had been to Budcombe."

"Yes, Nannie, I have."

"I've been there too. Father and I stayed there the Easter before last. And then I was there again last spring, staying from Friday till Monday with Fanny. She lives at Budcombe, you know. When were you there last?"

"If you're quite sure the tea isn't too strong now, I think I might venture to take another cup," interposed the invalid. "With no sugar, please." Mrs. Trent's tone conveyed a vague impression that in thus graciously expressing her willingness to drink more tea she conferred a special benefit upon a waiting world. But Frances welcomed the diversion; it enabled her to conceal how eagerly she awaited the reply to Nannie's question.

Casting a quick glance at her down-drooping head, Russell spoke.

"I went there a fortnight ago, Nannie. On the second of August."

"Why, that must have been just after you got back to England. The very day after, for I remember you arrived at Southampton on the first of the month. What took you to Budcombe?"

Drawn by some subtle magnetism, Frances's eyes, glancing up from under the shade of her wide straw hat, encountered those of Russell—steel blue in sharp contrast to his tanned skin. For a silent moment they held her captive. Then, as her eyes drooped in a sudden accession of shyness, he replied quietly—

"I returned to Budcombe for something I had left behind, Nannie."

"You've put in sugar, Miss Grant, after I specially

asked you not to. Now I shan't be able to drink it," lamented Mrs. Trent.

"Oh, I am so sorry. Let me give you a fresh cup," Frances made polite reply; but all her interest was centered in the conversation between Nannie and Sir Stephen.

"Did you get what you went back for?" asked literal Nannie.

"No, Nannie. It wasn't there."

The appearance of a maid crossing the lawn with a card on a salver ended the cross-examination by arresting Nannie's attention.

Cynthia looked up crossly from her letters.

"Now who can this be, calling so late? Can't I get a cup of tea in peace. Preece is an idiot. Why didn't she say we weren't at home? If Gunter had been in, he'd have known better. This sort of thing always happens when he has his afternoon off."

Some magic in the name printed on the card changed Mrs. Chauncery's petulance to gratified excitement. Her fatigue was forgotten in animation.

"Lady Margaret Codley! How perfectly sweet of her to call. Preece, I shall bring Lady Margaret out here to have tea. Order a fresh tea-pot at once. Sir Stephen, we owe this visit to you. Lady Margaret and her husband are giving the Rifle Range to Monk Stenton, you know. I wonder if her father will be at the opening. You know she is a daughter of the Duke of Redletts, and though her husband has no title he is immensely wealthy. I suppose she has called to thank you personally for promising to open the Range to-morrow."

At the news of the arrival, Mrs. Trent, who had been on the point of departure, revealed signs of again subsiding into her chair. As that did not accord with Mrs. Chauncery's desire to rid her lawn of an unpicturesque figure, she proceeded to evict her friend in the most civil manner possible.

"I think you are wise to go indoors, Ellaline. It is unsafe for any one so fragile to run any risks. And the dew is beginning to fall. The temperature is decidedly lower than it was ten minutes ago. How pale you look, dear. I would advise you to lie down for an hour before dinner. Nannie, see Ellaline safely to her room—and put on your hat with the rosebuds before you return," she added, as the two set off.

"I must go and bring Lady Margaret out. Fanny, you'll try and rearrange the table, and see that Preece removes the soiled cups. It is so horrid to see a messy table. Make it look as smart as you can."

Cynthia had turned as she hastened off to call her final commands over her shoulder. Ellaline and Nannie had already vanished.

Russell turned to Frances, who had risen and was hurriedly collecting the cups and saucers that had been used.

"Leave these alone," he said.

He spoke so quietly that, wondering if she could have heard aright, Frances glanced up at him, her fingers the while mechanically continuing the task.

Advancing a step nearer, he took the dishes from her hand.

"Did you not hear me? I told you to leave that alone."

"But Cynthia asked——"

"Let Mrs. Chauncery's servants do her bidding. Leave this to them, and come on the river with me."

"You mean—later?"

"No, I mean now. This very minute."

"Oh!" cried Frances, filled with amazed delight at the brilliant audacity of the idea. "But what will Cynthia say if she finds us gone. And Lady Margaret wants to see you. Cynthia thought she had come specially."

"We won't be here to hear what Mrs. Chauncery says. And I don't want to see Lady Margaret." Russell was gathering up an armful of cushions from Ellaline's chair as he spoke. "Come!"

A couple of minutes later Cynthia, proudly piloting the somewhat stubby figure of her aristocratic guest across the lawn, was horrified to find the tea-table abandoned, and the lion whom she had anticipated exhibiting, vanished into the jungle!

Dumping the cushions down into the stern of the punt, Russell helped Frances in, then, jumping in himself, pushed off.

"In which direction did Chauncery go?" he asked. "Up stream? Then we'll go down."

A few minutes' skilful poling brought them to a quiet backwater, into which Russell guided the punt. So far they had scarcely spoken. Frances, resting luxuriously amongst her cushions—really resting for the first time that day—had been content silently to watch the action of Russell's alert mus-



cular figure as he moved to and fro, handling the long pole with accustomed ease. But when he had fixed the punt under an overhanging willow, and sitting down opposite her proceeded absently to fill his pipe, she knew that the hour of speech had come.

"You didn't know I was here when you came yesterday," he said at last, as if answering his own thoughts.

"No." Frances tried to speak carelessly, but she felt tongue-tied and awkward. "I didn't know. It was a—surprise to me to see you."

"I knew you were expected. Tom told me that a relation of Mrs. Chauncery's who had been staying next door to me at Budcombe was coming on a visit. You know I went to Devon for peace, to write an account of the Alfongoga campaign for the Government. And a tough job it was." Russell smiled ruefully at the recollection. "My pen isn't mightier than my sword, anyway," he confessed. "Tom guessed that we would meet at Budcombe. He asked if I had"—Russell paused and looked meditatively at his briar-root pipe—"noticed you there."

"Tom might have told me you were going to Budcombe." Frances spoke a little resentfully. "I can keep a secret. I wouldn't have told any one."

"He couldn't. He had given his word to tell no one."

"Did Cynthia not know?"

"Not even she. I must confess that I never realized what a sneaking thing an incognito was,

until you offered me hospitality on Christmas Day. I felt that I was treating you shamefully in entering your house while you remained in ignorance of who I was. And I determined to explain matters to you; but before I had an opportunity that trouble broke out in Hongola, and I was hastily summoned back to town. Before leaving I called. Unfortunately for me, you were out, and I could only leave a note. At the time, I confidently expected to return within a few weeks. But as fresh mischief was brewing among the natives at Romodo, I was dispatched there, and six months had passed before I was free. When I got home, a fortnight ago, I went to Budcombe, only to find that you were travelling in Scotland. Then I came here, and Chauncery told me you were expected shortly. So I waited . . .”

Then there had been no mistake. It had been for her and her alone that he had hastened back to Budcombe immediately on his arrival in England.

There was a feeling of electrical excitement in the air. Her heart beat furiously. Rapturous life seemed to fill her being. In an attempt to conceal her confusion of emotion, Frances tried to divert the conversation from herself.

“Then you really are quite a respectable person. You are not a dreadful man who tempts young men to gamble, and drives them to suicide, as Admiral Wyon thought? You knew he believed you had killed his nephew—or been the cause of his committing suicide—didn’t you?”

“Jove! No!” An amused smile had chased the serious expression from Russell’s face. “Was

that it? I couldn't imagine what the good soul was turning hot and cold about. Inviting me to dine one day, and defying me to come the next. When he first began questioning me, I merely thought he had found out who I was, and I couldn't for the life of me imagine why that should make him angry. When he walked off in a towering passion, I honestly thought the old chap must be dotty. I didn't like to say that to you, for, having seen you together, I naturally believed you and he were in some way related."

"He must strike strangers as looking peculiar, with his long white hair, and plaid, and no hat. But he really is an old dear, in spite of his funny little cranks. Everybody loves him. But tell me—there's another thing I don't quite understand—you acknowledged that you had been in the same regiment as his *bête noir*?"

"The 31st Hussars? Yes. So I was, at one time. But I exchanged into a regiment going to the front. Now you speak of it, I have a vague recollection of hearing that, after my time, an officer called Russell, who had proved himself a scoundrel, had been asked to resign. But these matters are wisely hushed up."

"Poor Admiral Wyon won't feel so triumphant when he learns who you really are," Frances prophesied. "He is a dear kind thing, and the very essence of hospitality, but he positively gloried when I was obliged to confess that you had pledged Mr. Rock not to reveal anything about you."

"Rock? Mr. Rock?" Russell was puzzled.

"Why! Don't you remember a man in deep

mourning who came to Budcombe on Boxing Day? And you asked him into your rooms——”

“Yes, yes. Of course I do. I had forgotten about that. He comes from Diddleswick, a town a few miles from my place. His people have been harness-makers there for generations. Make very reliable stuff too. I’ve dealt with them since I was a boy. Meeting Rock in Budcombe, and seeing he recognized me, I thought he might be inclined to gossip, so I got him to promise not to say anything about me.”

“Well, I can assure you he kept his word implicitly.”

“Good old Rock! He was visiting your landlady, wasn’t he? He said he had been calling for a lady friend next door.”

Frances blushed. She had no intention of betraying Mr. Rock’s secret, but she was a bad liar, so she answered bravely—

“No. I think he came to see me.”

“To see you? I didn’t know you had been to Diddleswick. Do you know my district. Do you know the Chase?” Russell asked eagerly.

“Oh no! I met Mr. Rock casually in London, and as he was spending a holiday at Budcombe he called. That’s all. But I wish you hadn’t asked him to refuse to tell what he knew of you. For the fact of your having done that seemed to justify Admiral Wyon’s suspicions, and made him certain he was right. He told everybody about you, and I’m afraid they believed him.”

“Did you doubt me?”

“Never. Never for an *instant!*” cried Frances.

"Not even when I disappeared, and never came back?"

"Not even then. What a forward person you must have thought me when I rushed into the shelter and invited you to dine with me. Why you didn't even know my name! I do wish I could learn to consider before I act. But I never do. It is my besetting vice."

"Say rather, your besetting virtue," amended Russell. "What memory do you think I carried away with me from Budcombe? What do you think I used to picture at night when we were shivering on the heights?"

"The sea—was it?" Frances ventured tremulously.

"No. It was a little lamp-lit room with a cosy fire, and you——" He paused, and Frances anxious to break the pregnant silence that oppressed her, rushed upon speech.

"And I—knowing that I had asked you to dinner on false pretences, for there was nothing to eat—making spasmodic conversation while I listened nervously to Gusta tumbling upstairs and wondered nervously what catastrophe she would next contrive to bring about! But speaking of dinner, how is the time getting on?"

"It's early yet. There's lots of time," Russell opined, drawing out his watch in leisurely fashion. "No, by Jove, there isn't, though. It's half-past seven already."

"And dinner is at a quarter to eight. And Cynthia will think us horribly disrespectful if we don't dress. Oh, do let us make haste. Cynthia hates any one to be unpunctual."

The current was flowing strongly down stream. A very few minutes had sufficed to bring them to the backwater. It took quite half an hour's stiff poling to take them back.

When her feet touched land, Frances fled housewards. A minute later Russell, who had waited behind to secure the punt, overtook her.

"Why are you rushing like this?" he asked. "Being late isn't a crime, surely?"

"It is with Cynthia," Frances panted. "She's awfully put out if anybody is late."

"But Nannie and I were more than an hour late for luncheon one day last week, and she wasn't a bit annoyed."

"Ah, but I'm not Nannie Chauncery," Frances answered breathlessly, as, throwing her garden hat on to the stand in the porch, she ran upstairs to dress.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### CYNTHIA SPRINGS A MINE

**A** DESIRE to recall further to Russell's mind the memories he held in common with herself, induced Frances to waste more time in exchanging her white muslin dress for the black chiffon she had worn on Christmas night when they had dined alone together.

Pinning in her bosom the cluster of musk mallow whose glorious pink blossoms Russell had landed from the punt to pick for her, Frances ran downstairs, and entered the dining-room, her blue eyes sparkling, her cheeks aglow with happy excitement.

Frances had never looked lovelier, or more radiantly charming, and the fact did not endear her to her hostess, who was feeling particularly incensed against this cousin who, by putting in an inopportune appearance at the critical moment threatened to overthrow her own secret plans.

Tom Chauncery gave her kindly welcome. Nannie, whose eyes showed trace of recent tears, cast at her a reproachful glance that Frances fortunately failed to see, for she would have been puzzled to divine the cause.

Though she appeared to be conversing amicably enough with Sir Stephen, Cynthia received the apology of his fellow-culprit with discomfiting

silence ; and chose to ignore her protestation that she would much prefer not to have any course recalled for her—that she would infinitely prefer to begin at the stage the others had already reached.

“ If you are wise, Fan, you’ll take all that is offered you. You’re in for a wiggling. Cynthia is on the war-path, and you’ll need a good dinner to support you,” Chauncery made confidential counsel, displaying that cheerful disregard of his wife’s ill-humour so frequently exhibited by callous yokemates. “ Where did you and Stephen get to? We waited over twenty minutes before beginning dinner.”

“ We had gone down stream foolishly, and had to return against the current. And we did not notice the hour until it was too late. I am so sorry. You should not have waited at all. It was too good of you.”

“ I’m afraid you must blame me for everybody not waiting longer,” Mrs. Trent interposed with a self-accusatory simper. “ Though it wouldn’t have been much good, would it, for you really did not return until some time after we had begun, and then you had both to change. But I turn so dreadfully faint if I have to wait for food. I can eat so very little at a time. My appetite is so ridiculously small, that it absolutely exhausts me to remain more than two hours without nourishment.”

A tall branching *épergne* laden with fruit blocked Russell from the view of Frances, and she was sorry. An encouraging smile from him would have gladdened her heart. As it was, she felt



she could forget Cynthia's little display of spleen in the recollection that immediately on his arrival in England Russell had journeyed to Budcombe to keep his promise to her. The tide of joy that filled her was too deep to be ruffled by the foul wind of Cynthia's petty displeasure. She was lost in a happy dream when the signal to leave the table sent her into the hall with the other ladies.

Hastening up to her cousin, Frances earnestly repeated her apology.

"Cynthia, I am so very sorry about being unpunctual. It was quite unintentional. I had no idea how time had gone. Neither had Sir Stephen. You know tea was late. I do hope you'll forgive me?"

At the sound of Russell's name Nannie had emitted a suppressed sniff, as though the cause of her recent grief still rankled, but Frances did not notice it.

"We will not discuss the matter just now," Cynthia had made chilly reply, at once turning her attention to the account Ellaline was giving of the varied deleterious effects that coffee, when drunk at that hour, had had upon her delicate organism. And Frances left her, feeling like a child who has been promised a whipping on the morrow.

Soon after the men joined them, Mrs. Trent, as became her invalid condition, retired to rest. Nannie claimed Sir Stephen for their nightly *bélique*, and the others played bridge until the appearance of whisky and soda proved the forerunner of the candlesticks and the "good-nights."

Alone in her attic room, Frances took off her dress and hung it on one of the row of wall pegs

that was the sole accommodation provided for her wardrobe.

She had slipped on a little blue flannel dressing-jacket, and, having taken the hairpins out of her hair, had seated herself by the open window. But the brush lay idle on her lap. A delicious sense of listlessness overcame her. She wanted to think—to try to realize the sudden and scarcely accountable sense of bliss that possessed her.

Without, the tree-tops showed dark against the gold-flecked sky. The sounds of the day were hushed. Her lips were dumb, but her voiceless heart trilled pæans of joy. In her soul, as in all the lovely starlit world, a great peace seemed to reign.

A peremptory tap at her door brought Frances down to earth with a bump.

"Come in," she cried, anticipating nothing more formidable than a visit from Nannie.

It was Cynthia who entered.

Imagining her cousin's visit a token of her restored friendliness, Frances jumped up, and received her warmly.

"This is nice of you, Cynthia. Will you take the chair? I can sit on the bed."

But Mrs. Chauncery had come in war, not in peace. Refusing to be seated, she turned the cold eye of disapproval upon her cousin, who, in lace-trimmed petticoat and dressing-jacket, was looking particularly girlish and charming.

"I prefer to stand, thank you. I came merely to see if you had any explanation to offer respecting your rudeness this afternoon."

"My rudeness?" Frances asked, astounded. "Oh Cynthia, I *hope* I wasn't rude. I didn't mean to be rude. I was awfully sorry to be so late for dinner. It was quite an accident. Oh, I hope you didn't really think I was *rude*?"

"You knew Lady Margaret had come principally to see Sir Stephen. You can't say you didn't know. I intended bringing her out to have tea on the lawn, for I especially asked you to see that things were nice. Yet, knowing that, you deliberately got Stephen Russell to take you out in the punt. And when I brought her out, what did we find? A slovenly tea-table, and Sir Stephen vanished, leaving no word of where he had gone, or when he'd be back!"

With the consciousness that for a space she had completely forgotten the existence of Lady Margaret, swift contrition smote the tender conscience of Frances.

"Oh, Cynthia, I am so sorry. I don't know how I did it, but I'm afraid I quite forgot all about Lady Margaret being here."

Mrs. Chauncery's slender nostrils emitted a sound that can best be described as a snort. It might not be a graceful or a distinguished sign of disapproval, but it was an expressive one.

"That is not difficult to understand," she said loftily. "Lady Margaret's visit was to me. It wasn't to you. You were a guest, not the hostess. It didn't matter a straw to you if she found things looking simply horrid and Gunter away, and only a maid to open the door. And I was perfectly exhausted with the heat and that long motor drive.

And then to take her out to the lawn after saying Sir Stephen was waiting there, longing to be introduced to her, and to find him gone. Nothing left but an appallingly untidy tea-table, and all the prettiest cushions taken—to ruin in the punt, I suppose. She must have thought us a dreadfully common lot of people. I *was* ashamed!"

In depicting her grievances, Mrs. Chauncery rarely got them into proper form. They were almost invariably out of perspective. She had a confusing way of drawing very small worries on exactly the same scale as crushing calamities.

"It was very inconsiderate of me, and very thoughtless," Frances acknowledged in all humility. "I should have thought of you. But it is over now, Cynthia, so I hope you'll forgive me, and excuse it."

"It is not any inconvenience of my own I think of most." Diverting the subject to a side issue, Mrs. Chauncery took up a severely high moral standpoint. "What appals me is your immodesty in going off in a punt with a man you had never seen until a few hours ago. Sir Stephen is not a ladies' man. He would never have suggested going in the punt with you alone, if you hadn't suggested it."

"But he told me he had often gone punting with Nannie."

Amazement at Cynthia's unexpected prudery incited Frances to offer this slender extenuation.

"That is quite apart from the question. Nannie has known Sir Stephen Russell all her life. He is her father's dearest friend. Besides——" Mrs. Chauncery paused. A meaning smile softened the

severity of her expression—"speaking of poor Nannie—just think how this sort of thing makes her suffer."

"Nannie?" cried Frances. "Why, what has Nannie to do with him—and me?"

Abandoning her censorious attitude, and preparing for confidence, Mrs. Chauncery sat down on the side of the narrow bed.

"Why Fanny—are you blind? Haven't you noticed how matters are between Nannie and Sir Stephen? I can't imagine how you can have avoided noticing. I'm certain people must be talking. Since he came here in the beginning of August he has scarcely ever let her out of his sight."

To a less biassed observer than Cynthia Chauncery, it might have appeared as though it were Nannie who was reluctant to let Sir Stephen out of her sight. But Frances did not say so.

"But Nannie is so young! She wore her hair down until a week or two ago," was all she said.

"Of course she is very young yet. Still, many girls have made happy marriages at seventeen, and Stephen Russell has always been Tom's greatest friend. We could implicitly trust him with our child's happiness."

"Is there an engagement between them?" Frances forced herself to put the question bluntly.

"Well, nothing definite perhaps, though it is quite an understood thing amongst us—he used always to call Nannie his little sweetheart—the matter is not definitely arranged yet. And you must not speak of it in the meantime. Sir Stephen

is so different about expressing his feelings. But we can read for ourselves. How appallingly absurd it will be at my age to have a married daughter."

With an affected little laugh Cynthia had gone, and with her going the glamour had passed from the night. Her coming had changed the world of Frances from a magic realm throbbing with possibilities of bliss, into a sphere of shoddy schemings, a place of unworthy plotting.

Her eyes opened, she now for the first time saw the reason of Nannie's sudden accession of importance in Cynthia's eyes, and understood Mrs. Chauncery's eagerness to consider the child she had so consistently chosen to ignore as grown up. She saw now that Cynthia regarded her daughter's pretty tasteful clothes, her dainty hats and sunshades—even the putting up of her hair, and the letting down of her skirts—as means to a greatly-desired end. Looking at the subject from Cynthia's wholly worldly standpoint, she realized what a relief it would be to a selfish woman, who was herself still young, to be relieved of the care of a daughter. And she fully realized what a triumph Cynthia would esteem it, did she succeed in marrying that daughter, a few weeks after she had left school, to one of the most distinguished men of the day.

"But why should I bother about what Cynthia says?" she chided herself. "The idea is too ludicrous for words. I'm certain Sir Stephen regards Nannie as a mere child, and I know the notion has never crossed Tom's mind. It is only one of Cynthia's silly schemes. She pretends to believe it because she wants to."

Feeling greatly comforted, Frances was twisting her long hair into a plait, when she heard the approach of hasty steps and, without pausing for the formality of knocking, Mrs. Chauncery burst into the room.

For a moment she stood mute, trembling in the grip of a rage that held her speechless, while Frances gazed at her in astonishment. Then she spoke, breaking into accusation that was none the less vehement in being voiced in a tone that showed that, even when she was angry, Mrs. Chauncery did not lose sight of the inexpediency of permitting private discussions to be overheard by such members of her domestic staff as occupied adjacent attics.

"So you have been cleverly deceiving us! If any one had told me, I wouldn't have believed that you would have acted so slyly and deceitfully towards us who have always been your best friends. I knew you were foolish, and improvident, and opinionative, but I never dreamt you were either crafty or cunning!"

"But, Cynthia—tell me. What have I done?"

"You knew Stephen Russell before you came here, and yet you pretended to meet him as an utter stranger. And you allowed us to go through the form of introducing you to each other, when you already knew him and he had been in the habit of visiting you at Budcombe!"

"But Cynthia, that isn't quite true . . ." Frances was faltering, oppressed by the consciousness that the evidences were against her, and that she had no strong defence to offer.

"What isn't true?" Cynthia demanded in a fierce undertone. "Is it untrue that you had met Stephen Russell before coming here, or that he had visited you at Budcombe?"

"But Cynthia, you don't understand, I can explain—I can, really. He—I——" the attempted extenuation died on her lips. After all, the story of their past friendship was sacred to Sir Stephen and herself. Why bare the thing that lay nearest her heart for Cynthia to peck at?

"I went into Nannie's room just now, and found the poor child crying herself sick, because you had gone off with Sir Stephen in the punt. And she said she was certain you and he had known each other at Budcombe. She had heard you speaking of it on the lawn this afternoon. Was that not true?"

Frances was silent.

"I have a right to ask. And I insist upon an answer."

"We did meet at Budcombe. But that is some time ago, and I did not then know that he was Sir Stephen Russell, or I would have told you, Cynthia."

"Don't prevaricate, please. How could you have been on speaking terms without knowing who he was? Some one must have introduced you."

"But we were never really introduced till you did it, Cynthia—" In a misguided attempt to vindicate herself, Frances rushed into new dangers. "We met quite by chance at Budcombe. No one knew him there. It was on the road, and——"

"And you confess to having struck up a high-



road acquaintance with a man you had never before seen? And without knowing his name, or anything about him, you asked him to your lodging?" Mrs. Chauncery's second insinuation was the result of clever guessing. But Frances could not refute it. She kept silent.

"That is enough. It shows the opinion Stephen Russell formed of your place in Society when he let you receive him under a false name. It is easy to understand what he thinks of you."

With a rustle of silk, a jingle of jewelled appendages and a gratifying consciousness of having secured not only the last word but also most of the preceding ones, Mrs. Chauncery left her guest to the exclusive possession of the room that Mrs. Trent's maid had refused to occupy.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### FRANCES RUNS AWAY

CYNTHIA CHAUNCERY, like Macbeth, had murdered sleep.

Undressing automatically, Frances put out her candle and lay down. But she could not rest. A thousand conflicting emotions tormented her. The wounds caused by Cynthia's poisoned arrows were already inflamed and throbbing fiercely.

Her cousin had called her sly and cunning and crafty. And Frances wondered wearily if she had really acted so deceitfully in not at once openly acknowledging that she and Russell had met before. Perhaps it had been a duty to take her hostess into her confidence. "But Tom knew," Frances told herself. "And if neither he nor Sir Stephen had told Cynthia, why should I?"

The wound that smarted most was that caused by Mrs. Chauncery's reference to her unladylike behaviour in inviting a male stranger to visit her. The inference that she had done so had arisen merely from conjecture on Cynthia's part, but the shot had told.

Familiar things viewed through the distorted vision of another are apt to assume strange outlines. "Was I really forward and immodest?"

Frances asked herself piteously, and found it difficult to reply in the negative.

Her unpremeditated invitation, though it had been prompted solely by generous feeling and kindly sympathy for one whom she rightly had believed to be unjustly treated, now appeared bold and ill-considered. It was quite possible that even although Sir Stephen had acted upon it, her suggestion had impressed him as obtrusive and ill-bred. As Cynthia had pointed out, he had withheld his confidence from her. And, as Cynthia had also said, no man who respected a woman would allow her to remain under a false impression as to his personality.

She wondered if there could be any actual foundation for the mother's hints regarding Nannie and Sir Stephen. His manner towards her had been kindly, even affectionate, but then he was more than double Nannie's age. As to Nannie's adoration for him, there could be no question; but Frances had regarded it simply as school-girl devotion, a species of ardent hero worship.

Frances was tender of heart. The picture Cynthia had drawn of Nannie, lying sobbing alone in the darkness, troubled her.

Getting out of bed and putting on a white dressing-gown, she slipped along the darkened corridor and down the stair leading to Nannie's room.

"Nannie," she whispered, tapping softly. "Nannie dear, may I come in?"

Receiving no reply, she gently pushed open the door and entered.

Nannie was sound asleep, though an occasional

involuntary catching of the breath bore witness to her recent outburst of grief.

Moving nearer, Frances looked at her closely—tenderly.

A young girl asleep should be esteemed fit theme for a poet's pen, choice subject for an artist's pencil. But at that moment Nannie Chauncery's appearance was hardly conducive to either sonnet or picture. Mrs. Chauncery's somewhat tardy determination to augment her child's personal attractions was indicated by the complexion cream that smeared her face, the white kid gloves that covered her hands, and by the thicket of curling-pins that constrained her dark locks to assume fashionable waves, and in the process of so doing rendered the pillow of their wearer an uneasy one.

Frances loved all young and helpless things. She had been fond of Nannie Chauncery ever since the knowledge of her mother's indifference awoke her special sympathy. As she looked at the tear-stained face of the sleeping girl, appreciation of the isolation of each human soul keenly touched her heart. Poor Nannie was suffering, and, in common with every other human entity, she must endure her misery alone.

All about the room were traces of her devotion to her soldier-hero. A framed snapshot photograph cut from a newspaper—much distorted, and recognizable only to the eyes of love—of Sir Stephen landing at Southampton hung where it would meet the first glance of her waking eyes. The rose-bud he had worn on the night of Frances's arrival, set in water, stood on a table by her bed. The tie of

his regimental colours, by wearing which Nannie revealed to an indifferent world the secret of her allegiance to his corps, lay on the toilet-table.

"Poor Nannie! Poor little love-sick Nannie! You are young to know the meaning of jealousy," Frances thought, a throb of pity rising in her throat as, shading her candle with her hand, she crept away without disturbing the sleeper.

In the dark hour before the dawn, whose coming she awaited so apprehensively, Frances realized on how slender a groundwork her interest in Stephen Russell had been reared. On what small evidence she had nourished her faith in him.

Yesterday, she had forgotten all else except the fact that he had returned to Budcombe to explain to her his incognito. Now she remembered nothing but that he had allowed more than half a year to elapse before seeking to offer the explanation. Cynthia's bitter taunt, she told herself, must have had foundation in fact. No man would have permitted any woman he respected to remain so long in ignorance of his identity.

Even in the darkness her cheeks burned with the recollection of her impetuous action in inviting a stranger to dine with her alone, in her rooms. Yes, she realized now. She had been foolish, impetuous, over precipitate.

As the incoming dawn crept into the tiny low-roofed room, it enabled Frances to see clearly her true standing in Cynthia's worldly estimation. This was the first visit she had paid the Chauncerys since that January day on which she had so rashly determined to relinquish her fortune ; and Mrs. Chaun-

cery's consciousness of her cousin's changed monetary position had been marked in divers ways : in the allotment to her of this airless little roof-chamber overlooking the stable-yard , in imposing upon her the task of flower-picking in the sun that would have ruined Nannie's complexion ; in leaving her to entertain a querulous invalid while the others were enjoying themselves ; in the cold displeasure Cynthia had evinced during dinner ; in the uncalled-for insult of her recent accusations.

What further indignities the coming day might hold she knew not. After Cynthia's open declaration of war Frances shuddered to think what slights, what petty carping, what cold-shouldering might be in store for her. Tom Chauncery, she knew, would be absent all day fishing. She would be at the mercy of Cynthia.

Her slumbering spirit of independence awaking, made the trenchant inquiry : " Why remain here ? You have already overstayed your welcome. Why stay longer ? You have a place of your own to go to. Run away."

Frances greeted this simple solution of her difficulty with a heart-throb of relief. Certainly the only thing she could do to lighten Nannie's burden was to remove her own disturbing presence. Of another thing she was also assured. After what had passed between them, she could no longer accept the shelter of Cynthia Chauncery's roof—could no longer break her bread.

Cynthia had spoken truly when she said that they had been good friends to her—at least Tom Chauncery had been—and for his sake Frances was loth

to cut short her visit thus unceremoniously. She comforted herself with the knowledge that Tom Chauncery was a just man. She believed he would understand and, understanding, would not blame her unduly.

She prayed earnestly to be delivered from the thralldom of impulse, quite unconscious that, even while she raised the petition, she was impatiently awaiting the coming of the dawn that would enable her to act upon a sudden resolution!

When it was light enough, Frances arose, and having dressed, began quietly making preparations for her journey.

To run away was to take a coward's way of escape, but Frances did not pause to consider that. Her bruised spirit clung to the supporting thought that a hundred miles distant a quiet corner of her own awaited her: a place wherein she would be alike free from broils and patronage. It was a humble home perhaps, but one in which peace abode.

Her steamer-trunk and hat-box were in the room. Packing all her belongings, she strapped and locked them, and altered the labels. Then resting her paper on the shaky travesty of a dressing-table, she wrote in pencil a note of farewell to her hostess.

DEAR CYNTHIA,—

After what passed between us last night, I feel that it is better that I should not stay longer at Riversdale, and I think you will agree with me. I am returning at once to Budcombe. Might I trouble you to send on my luggage?

Will you give my love to Tom, and to Nannie?

Yours ever sincerely,

FRANCES GRANT.

She was ignorant of the running of trains, and to have descended to the library in quest of a Bradshaw would have been to court discovery. Trusting that during the morning hours there would be pretty frequent communication with London, she resolved to take the chance of finding a convenient train.

Taking her dressing-bag and *en-tout-cas*, she went quickly downstairs, availing herself of the back staircase, and thus avoiding the sight of the closed doors behind which her fellow-guests, ignorant of the tumult that had overwhelmed her, were slumbering. The bolts of the side door were easy to draw. Once out on the high-road, she felt once again mistress of herself, and of her actions.

It was another of the calm perfect mornings that so soon degenerate into a torrid day. From her night's repose Nature appeared to have awakened refreshed. Even the trails of bedstraw and of traveller's joy in the hedgerow seemed less thirsty, less oppressed by their coating of white dust.

Frances hastened along the lanes as though in dread of pursuit and capture, but the only person she encountered was a farm-labourer shambling by to begin his day's work.

Her arrival at the station coincided with the appearance of a sleepy porter armed with a broom. He proceeded to wreak a vicarious revenge on the lack of consideration for his personal comfort shown by early travellers, by raising so dense a cloud of dust with his sweeping, that Frances was glad to take refuge in the close little fly-blown waiting-room.



With the assurance that no train was due for half an hour came the discovery that she was hungry. An automatic machine offered the chill sustenance of butterscotch, chocolate, and cigarettes. Esteeming chocolate the most nourishing, Frances invested the few coppers in her possession on sundry meagre packages which consisted mainly of cardboard. A drink from the tin mug attached to the station water-can—luckily fresh filled—supplied gratis liquid refreshment.

To her unquiet mind the minutes seemed to drag. Forgetting that it wanted still more than an hour to the Riversdale breakfast-time, which was the earliest period that her absence was likely to be observed, Frances still felt apprehensive of pursuit.

It was with a sensation of relaxed strain that she sank back in the corner of the third-class carriage, and sought to close her tear-dimmed eyes from the sight of the beautiful Thames valley whence she was wilfully fleeing.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### CAPTURED

THE early start made by the Devon-bound train which Frances succeeded in catching at Waterloo Station would seem to have exhausted its energies, for it dawdled consistently throughout the journey. With the sun beating down upon its defenceless carriages it crawled along, taking five hours to a run that its nimbler brethren achieved in little over three.

Two o'clock had passed when Frances, weary of limb and leaden of spirit, reached Budcombe.

The mental picture she had cherished of her desired haven had shown it as sweet, peaceful, retired. The fact that it was yet August, and that the little seaside town was still enduring its annual influx of visitors, had slipped from her disturbed mind. She did not long remain in ignorance of the dominating presence of extraneous matter.

The lull of early afternoon was over the place when she jogged down the street in the hotel bus. Most people, residents and sojourners, were indoors ; but on the doorstep of her home Frances encountered traces of unknown occupants. A child's wooden spade stood in the porch. Strange hats decorated the hall-stand, and from beyond the closed door of the downstairs sitting-room came the murmur of unfamiliar voices.

Entering by the open door, Frances walked quietly upstairs without giving warning of her return. To have summoned Mrs. Lett would have necessitated explanation of her unheralded arrival, and she wanted to be alone. Her head ached. She longed, before seeing any one, to sit and rest without even thinking.

Opening the door of her sitting-room, she found it swept and garnished. The flower-glasses were empty, and a tissue-paper adornment, token of Mrs. Lett's taste in decoration, filled the grate. Otherwise the room was just as she had left it. Yet somehow Frances felt that it had changed. During her eighteen months of occupancy she had grown gradually to imagine it a room of quite tolerable proportions. Now, having come direct from a more spacious dwelling, it seemed cramped, shrunken, even mean.

Though the window was open behind the lowered blind the room was hot. Seating herself on the sofa, Frances began to unbutton her gloves.

She had a curious conviction that her life at Budcombe would never again satisfy her; that all that before had been pleasant and engrossing in the routine of her days there would never again suffice to make up her sum of happiness.

Rising at length with a sigh, she rang the bell. Gusta, her skirts as short, her apron as long, her caps as uncertain of their tenure as of yore, appeared and hailed her with unaffected delight.

"Why, Gusta, you haven't changed a bit!" Frances made involuntary exclamation. "You aren't any taller."

"No, Miss," replied practical Gusta. "I haven't 'ad much time, now 'ave I? You ain't been gone only a month."

And with a swift heart-throb Frances realized how few weeks had elapsed since she had packed and set off so blithely with the Frews.

"Miss Mithen's gentleman he called, Miss." Gusta, who was bursting with the incident that had been the subject of much comment and discussion between her mistress and Miss Mithen, seized the very first opportunity to disburden herself of the news. "He called not much more than a week after you'd gone. An' he asked for you, an' I fetched Missis, and she said as how you were travelling in Scotland, and wouldn't be back till dear knows when. An' he said it didn't matter, an' he didn't leave a card or nothing. An' he never went near Miss Mithen. And him next door! She *was* in a way about it. But there! Missis is a-callin'. She will be suprised when she hears as how you're back."

Five minutes later Mrs. Lett bustled in to welcome the return home of her permanent lodger.

"You do look tired, Miss. Travelling don't agree with you, if you'll excuse my saying so. Real worn-out like, you are."

The words of commiseration brought a lump to Frances's throat.

"I had an early start, and the train was very hot and crowded. I am a little tired."

"Then about lunch—what would you fancy to eat?"

"Oh, anything will do. I am thirsty, not hungry I would prefer a cup of tea to anything else."

Mrs. Lett nodded her head significantly.

"You leave it to me, Miss. I've got a spark of your China tea still in the caddy. And I'll brew you a nice pot of tea and send you up something with it that will do you good."

When a tempting jam omelette appeared in company with the teapot, Frances, out of consideration for Mrs. Lett's feelings, forced herself to eat it, and having eaten, felt appreciably better. It is indeed a heavy woe that is not lightened by a comfortable meal. In spite of the gain in physical strength, however, she still felt vaguely irritated and restless. A disquieting sense of having mis-managed her affairs, of having muddled up her life, haunted her.

Exchanging her dust-stained travelling-dress for a cool cambric, she went out. Before her lay the minor evil of having to invent a plausible reason for her precipitate return. The Frews and her other Budcombe friends knew that she was expected to stay with the Chauncerys until the middle of September. Frances hated lying, yet she could hardly make the undignified admission: "I quarrelled with my cousin, and ran away in a huff."

She knew that she was in duty bound to tell the Frews of her arrival at Budcombe before they learned of it through casual rumour, but just then while her wound was so raw and aching, she felt she wanted to conceal it from the world.

Turning to the left on leaving the gate, she walked towards the least frequented part of the beach.

The aspect of the trim little Parade had suf-

ferred temporary deterioration. Folding-chairs, baby-carriages and toys littered the tiny lawns. Down on the cobble-stones by the gaily-striped bathing-boxes towels and bathing dresses lay drying in multi-coloured rows. Unfamiliar eyes met hers with the impersonal gaze of those accustomed to crowded thoroughfares. The rustic shelter that had played so vital a part in her broken romance was filled with nurses and their charges.

Passing it with averted eyes, Frances walked on.

The tide was low, and the horn of rock at the extreme end of the bay was uncovered. At high water it was completely submerged. Now the long dark reef that lay like a black mark athwart the sparkling sea, offered a tempting place for one disposed to solitude.

The holiday visitors rarely strayed far beyond the sea-front of the little town, and the ridge was tenantless excepting for an amateur naturalist—grey of beard, but sprightly of limb, and enthusiastic of temperament—who, with his stockingless feet protected from sharp surfaces by canvas shoes, was examining the rock-pools in quest of specimens to fill the glass jam-jars he carried in readiness for their reception.

Walking out to the farthest point Frances sat down and, sheltering herself with her umbrella, looked out over the sea. Amongst the golden-brown sea-weed that fringed the rocks the tiny wavelets were whispering. From the bay came the far-off murmur of children's voices.

Frances had always loved the sea, but to-day its grand quiescence was out of tune with her unrest.

Had it been angrily lashing at the stones, or grey and sullen, its vicarious expression of disquiet would have soothed her. As it was, its sparkling gaiety seemed to jar upon her sombre mood.

She had made brave resolve to put Riversdale and all its agitating inmates and occurrences out of her thoughts, and to take up the threads of her former life where she had laid them down. Nothing is easier to make than a praiseworthy resolution ; the arduous part of the undertaking lies in adhering to it. Do what she might, Frances found her memory stray back to the Thames Valley, and her mind busy itself with the conjectures as to what was happening there.

She longed to know how Cynthia had explained her absence—for the others could not have failed to remark upon her vacant place at the breakfast-table. Cynthia Chauncery was a mistress of sophistry. Frances knew she could depend upon her cousin to invent some quite plausible-sounding reason for the hasty departure of her guest.

An irksome consciousness of her own impotence—the mortifying knowledge that, however false the excuse Cynthia might advance for her absence, it was out of her power to confute it, harrassed her.

“ And this afternoon Sir Stephen will be opening the rifle range, and Cynthia will be in her glory,” she told herself enviously. “ How foolish I was to leave. Now he will never understand. He is sure to be sent away to some dangerous place almost immediately, and he may be killed and I shall never see him again. If I had only thought before I acted. Oh, will I never learn wisdom ! ”

Her heart felt heavy. Life stretched before her like some weary task to be endured to the end. The exciting events of the past few days had left her usually equable temperament restless, her steady nerves unstrung. Even the sound of some one moving over the rocks irritated her unreasonably. She wished the naturalist would go.

"I'm sure his jam-jars must all be quite full now. Why doesn't he put on his stockings and go home," she thought impatiently, without troubling to look round. "He'll get rheumatism if he goes about like that much longer."

The steps approached nearer; came quite close. And Frances, glancing upwards with a start from under her umbrella, found Sir Stephen Russell looking down at her."

"Oh!" she said. "Oh!"

As she strove to scramble to a more dignified position, her foot slipped, and she would have fallen, had he not caught her in his arms.

"Frances. . . ." he said, breathing the word as though it were a caress. "Frances. . . ."

"It was Nannie who told me," Sir Stephen explained later when, seated beneath the kindly shelter of the umbrella, they were wishing that the tide which threatened to drive them from the hallowed spot would stand still. "It seems that Nannie had guessed that we had met at Budcombe, and she told her mother of it last night. And then, being afraid that Mrs. Chauncery might have been nasty about it to you, Nannie went into your room this morning to tell you she was sorry. When she found you had gone, the dear little soul was genuinely



grieved. She came and made a clean breast of the matter to me."

"And you?" said Frances softly.

"Well, seeing you had run away, there was nothing left for me to do but to—run after you."

"Nannie will be banished to the Versailles boarding-school now, I'm afraid. No more young-ladyhood for her in the meantime."

Frances spoke half inadvertently. She was thinking of Cynthia's frustrated matrimonial ambitions regarding her daughter.

"School's the best place for her. She's a mere child yet. Fifteen or sixteen, isn't she?"

"Oh no! Nannie is seventeen, and she has just got her hair up and long dresses!"

"Has she? I never noticed," confessed the obtuse Russell.

"How surprised Admiral Wyon will be—when he learns that you are not a ravening wolf after all."

"I'm afraid he'll still think me one when he hears of my designs on his pet lamb. We must tell the Admiral our news first. We owe it to him."

"And the Frews next——"

"And then Mrs. Chauncery."

When he mentioned Cynthia's name, Russell's hand clasped the one he held more closely, as though he guessed something of what had passed.

"But what about the rifle range at Monk Stenton," cried Frances, struck by sudden recollection. "You were to have opened that this afternoon—weren't you?"

"Jove! yes," admitted Russell. "So I was!"





20 5 1 1      7  
8 6 12      11.  
3. 8 14  
3. 7  
5. 10. 12  
21 16 12  
7 2 13

Stanford University Libraries



3 6105 022 363 613

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES  
CECIL H. GREEN LIBRARY  
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004  
(415) 723-1493

All books may be recalled after 7 days

DATE DUE

--	--

